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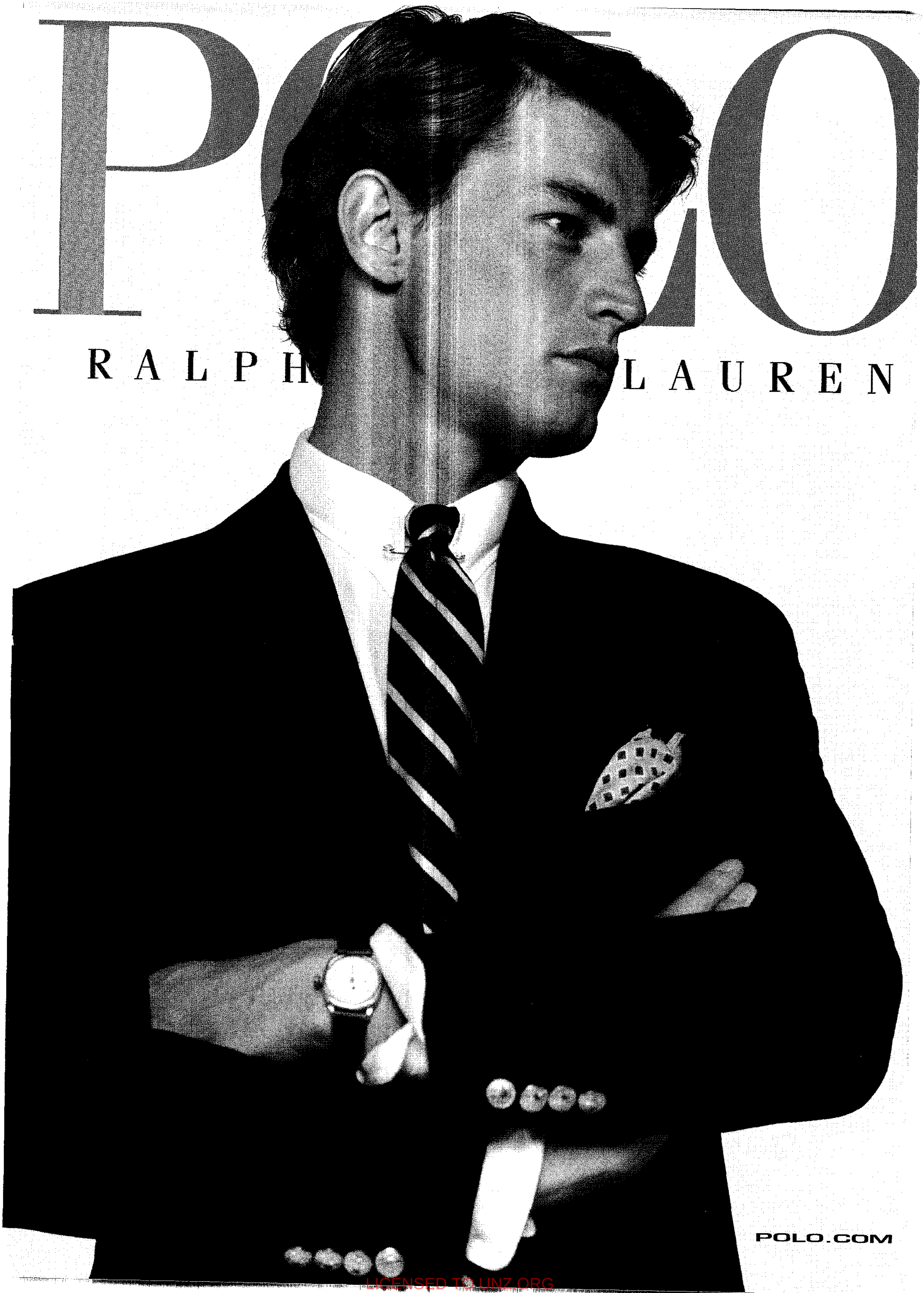
APRIL 5, 2004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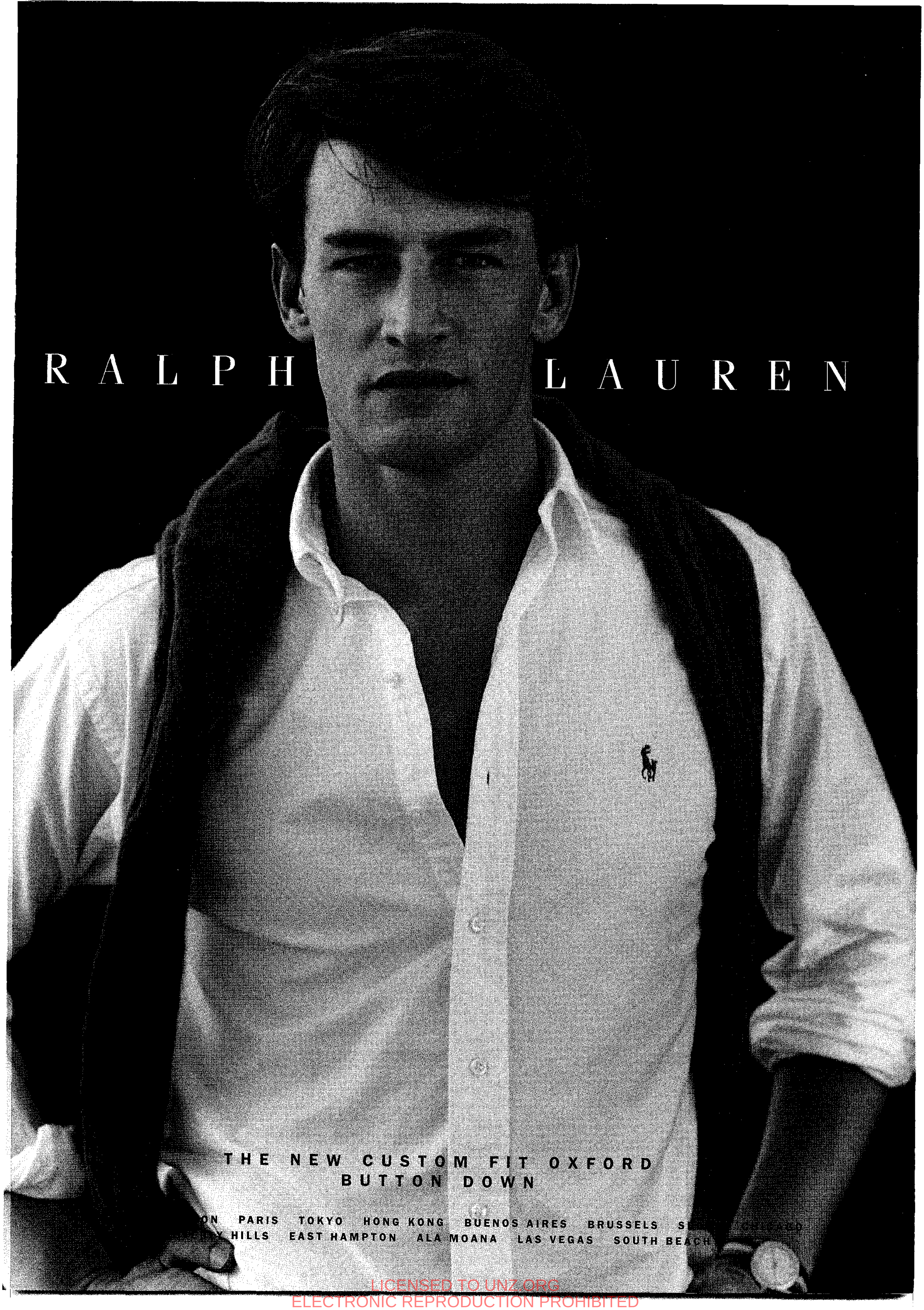
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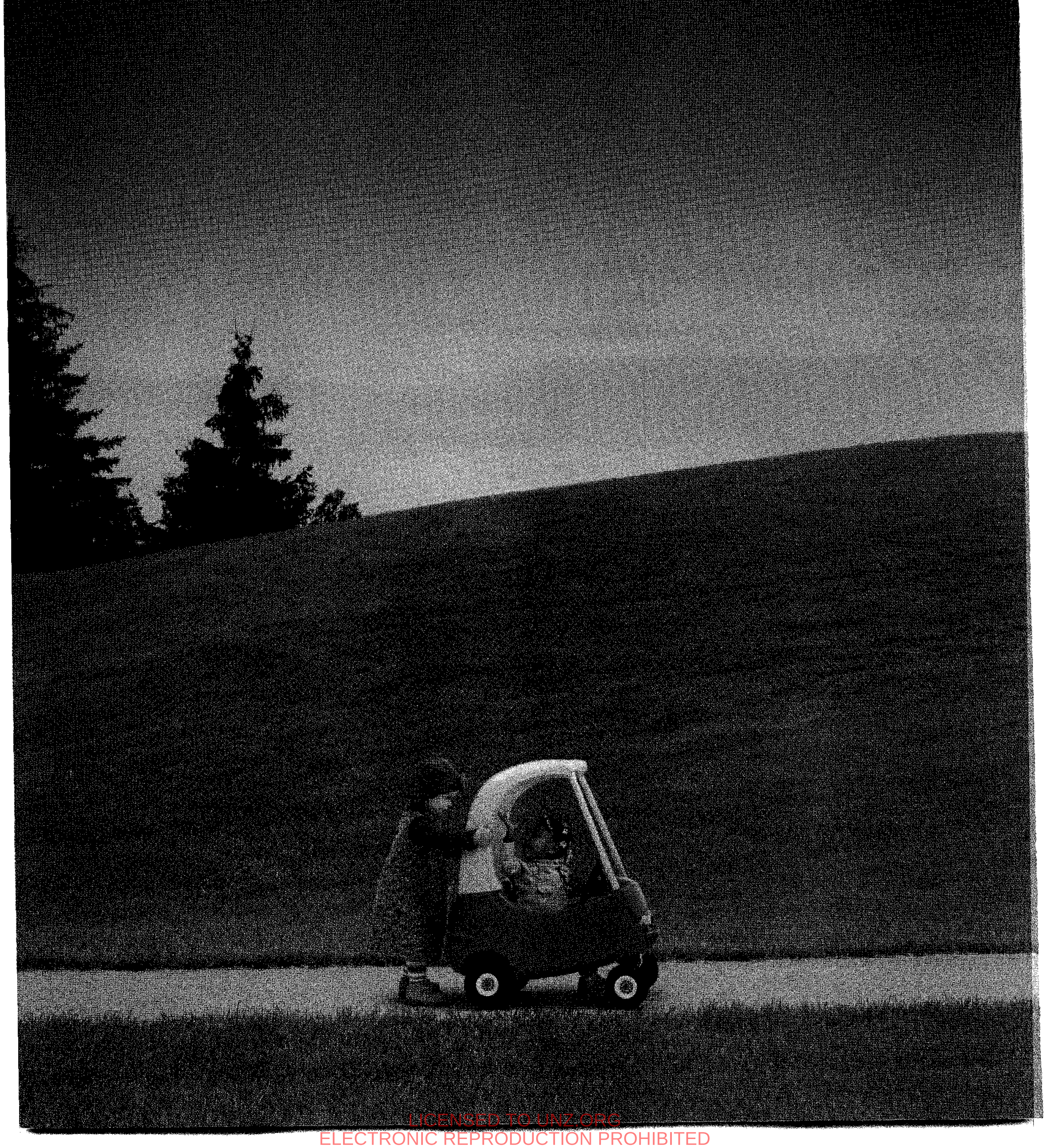

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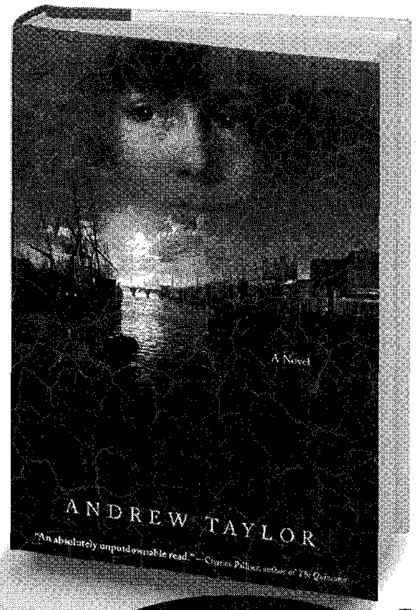
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8 GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN
27 THE TALK OF THE TOWN
Richard Clarke's war; does punctuality pay?

Jake Halpern 32 THE MUSIC SCENE
Selling the Beat
St. Louis's Trackboyz break a new act.

John Kenney 37 SHOUTS & MURMURS
The Truth

Burkhard Bilger 38 A REPORTER AT LARGE
The Height Gap
Europeans are getting taller; why aren't we?

John Lahr 46 PROFILES
Escaping the Matrix
The making of Laurence Fishburne.

Peter Hessler 58 LETTER FROM CHINA
Kindergarten
A family crisis in a town on the Great Wall.

Jonathan Lethem 68 FICTION
"Super Goat Man"

THE CRITICS

John Lahr 76 THE THEATRE
"Twentieth Century," "Well."

BOOKS

79 Briefly Noted

Louis Menand 80 *Dominic Sandbrook's "Eugene McCarthy."*

Alex Ross 84 MUSICAL EVENTS
"Salome" and "Don Giovanni" at the Met.
Photograph by Richard Avedon.

Nancy Franklin 87 ON TELEVISION
"Significant Others."

Anthony Lane 89 THE CURRENT CINEMA
"The Ladykillers," "Intermission."

POEMS

Mary Oliver 34 "Daisies"

Robert Hass 56 "Then Time"

COVER *"Stars and Stripes Forever," by Mark Ulriksen* THE BACK PAGE *"The Road to San Antonio," by Michael Crawford* DRAWINGS *Leo Cullum, David Sipress, Robert Mankoff, Bruce Eric Kaplan, Mick Stevens, Wayne Bressler, P. C. Vey, Lee Lorenz, Charles Barsotti, William Haefeli, Frank Cotham, Danny Shanahan, Matthew Diffee, Roz Chast, Alex Gregory, John O'Brien*

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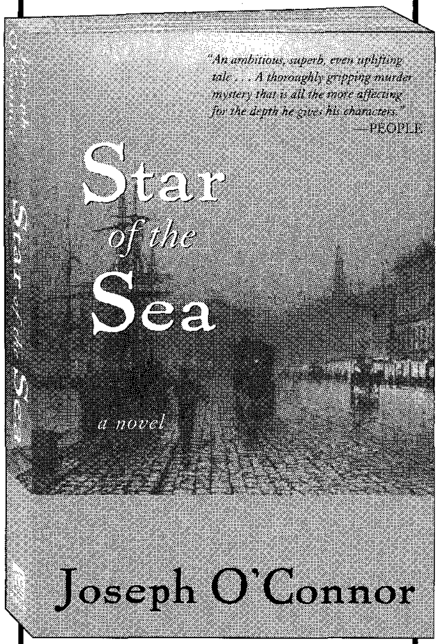

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CONTRIBUTORS

John Lahr ("Escaping the Matrix," p. 46; The Theatre, p. 76), the magazine's senior drama critic, is writing a biography of Tennessee Williams.

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Mary Oliver (Poem, p. 34) has just published "Why I Wake Early," a new collection of poems.

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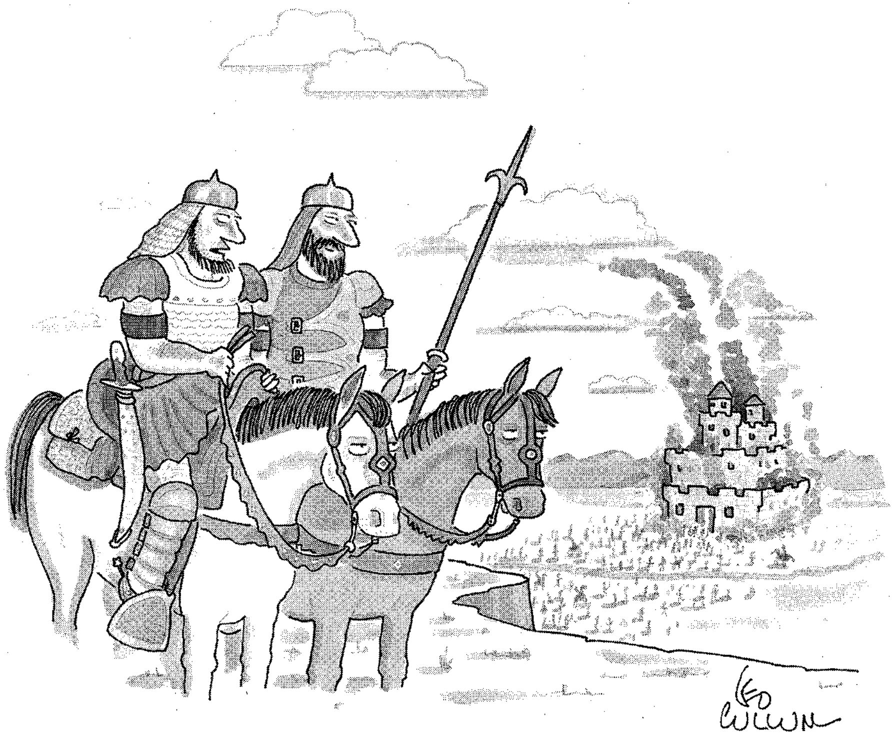
Michael Crawford (The Back Page, p. 92), who has been contributing to the magazine since 1983, is working on a book of cartoons about marriage. ♦



"I prefer to pillage from the right and govern from the center."

THE MAIL

THE PAKISTANI BOMB

As a Senate staff director working on nonproliferation issues for more than twenty years, I was involved in many investigations into Pakistan's evolution as a nuclear power and the nuclear black market that Seymour M. Hersh describes ("The Deal," March 8th). Hersh quotes a Bush Administration intelligence officer as saying, "We had every opportunity to put a stop to the A. Q. Khan network fifteen years ago." That is probably true, but to stop Pakistan from acquiring the bomb itself, which, according to the best accounts, it has had since 1987, the U.S. would have had to be willing to put nonproliferation in South Asia ahead of the Cold War policy of sending arms to the mujahideen to fight the Russians in Afghanistan. This we were not prepared to do. There were legislative initiatives designed to stop, or at least slow, the Pakistani bomb, using tough sanctions as a lever. They never got a chance to work because the Reagan and first Bush Administrations, along with a feckless Congress, prevented them from being implemented via a series of waivers. Much of the support given to the mujahideen, with Pakistan's coöperation, benefitted the Taliban and, by extension, Osama bin Laden. It was only when the Russians left Afghanistan, in 1990, that sanctions were imposed, too late to prevent the bomb or affect the supply network. After September 11, 2001, sanctions were lifted so that we could get Pakistani support for the war on terror. It is a supreme irony that not getting tough with Pakistan over its nuclear activities in the eighties has led to the heightened risk of nuclear terrorism that is the reason given by the present Administration that we can't get tough with Pakistan now.

Leonard Weiss
Silver Spring, Md.

BIGGER THAN NADER

Hendrik Hertzberg is right to be concerned about the effect of Ralph Nader's candidacy on the Presidential race (Comment, March 8th). But the real problem, clearly, is our archaic election system: the lack of any runoff and, especially, the winner-take-all feature, which makes voting for President a waste of time in all but a few "swing" states. We may be stuck with the overweighting of small-state votes because of the impossibility of getting these states to agree to a constitutional amendment; but nothing in the Constitution says that all of a state's electoral votes must go to one candidate. Individual states can and should decide that their votes be allocated proportionally (as Maine and Nebraska already do). As things stand, Naderites, like Perot voters before them, must risk electing someone they despise if they are to express their convictions. The over-all result can be an unrepresentative travesty; it certainly was the last time.

Brian A. Jones
Brooklyn, N.Y.

Was Ralph Nader "sufficient unto himself" to cost Al Gore the 2000 election, as Hertzberg writes? The state-by-state results do show two states (Florida and New Hampshire) where Nader's vote count, if added to Gore's total, would have given Gore the Presidency. But it could just as easily be argued that, if George Bush had taken the four states (Oregon, Wisconsin, Iowa, and New Mexico) that Gore won by fewer votes than went to Pat Buchanan, he wouldn't have needed Florida's electoral votes. Blaming third- or fourth- party candidates for the outcome of a national election, no matter how close, simply dodges harder questions—in the Democrats' case, about how a Vice-President in prosperous times could have let the race get so close in the first place.

Ron Morgan
New York City

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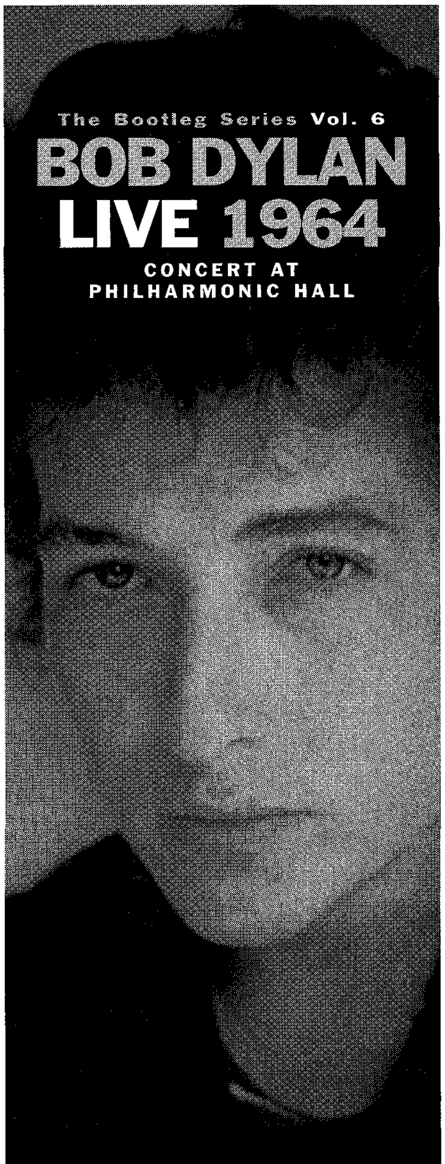
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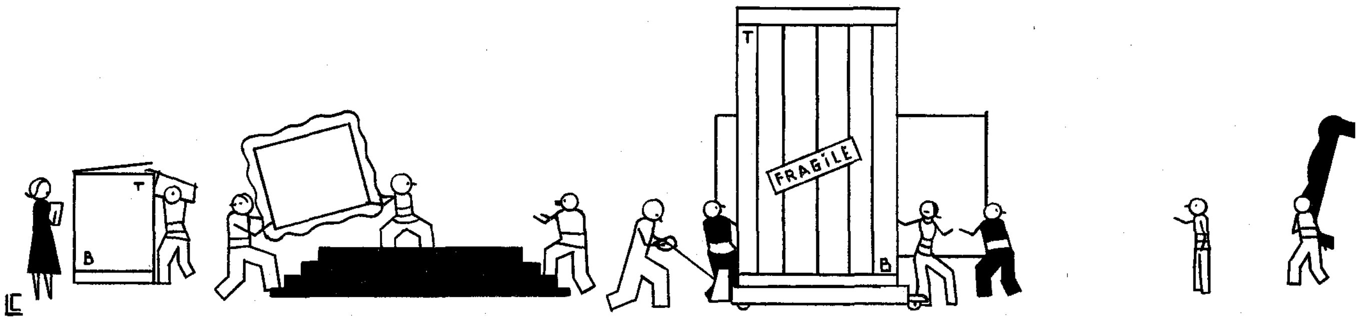

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For expanded events listings, please visit www.newyorker.com/goingson.

THIS WEEK

A VOICE IN THE DARKNESS

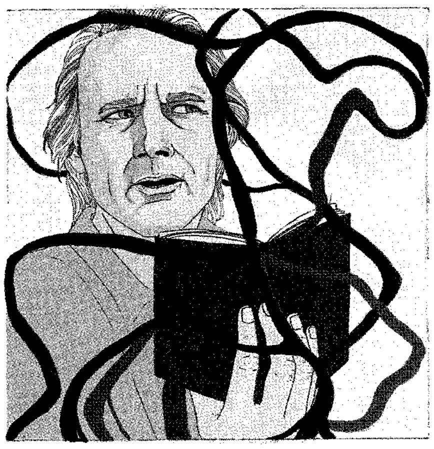
The rock band Fantômas, named after the antihero of a series of legendary French crime novels, was formed by the idiosyncratic and talented vocalist Mike Patton after his previous band Faith No More broke up. Patton is a dyed-in-the-wool avant-gardist, and under his leadership Fantômas has released some of the darkest, strangest music around. Their second record, "The Director's Cut," featured reworked versions of themes from classic movies, including "The Godfather," "Night of the Hunter," and "Rosemary's Baby"; Patton's wordless, Mephistophelian humming on the last is unforgettable. The newest Fantômas album is composed of a single seventy-four-minute noise symphony, with bits of songcraft drifting in and out. (Irving Plaza, April 5; see Night Life.)

PIECES OF APRIL

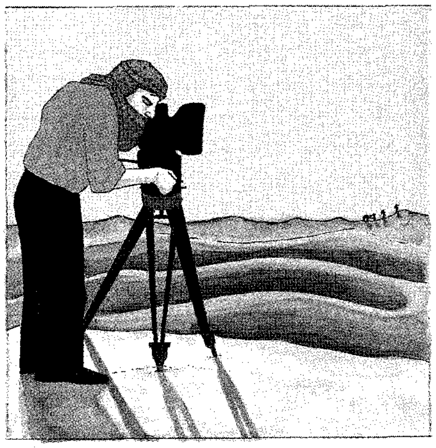
Edna St. Vincent Millay once asked, "To what purpose, April, do you return again?" For the past eight years, the Academy of American Poets has answered this question with National Poetry Month, turning a season of showers and daffodils into a celebration of verse. This year's festivities start with "Poetry & the Creative Mind," a program featuring the actors Mary-Louise Parker, Meryl Streep, Vanessa Redgrave, and Kevin Kline, the playwright Tony Kushner, the artist Brice Marden, and others reading their favorite poems. (Alice Tully Hall, April 6; see Above and Beyond.)

EVERYBODY LOVES DEPARDON

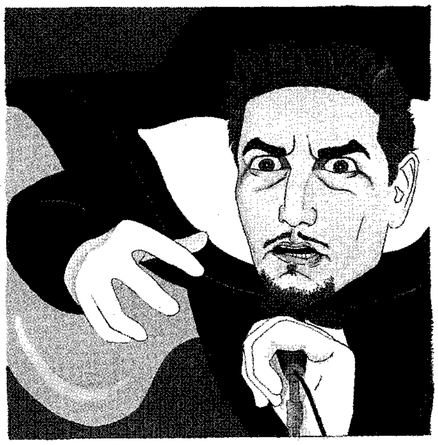
In his long, unclassifiable career, Raymond Depardon has won a Pulitzer for his photography in Chad, made a documentary about petty criminals in Paris ("Caught in the Act"), and filmed his autobiography ("Les Années Déclic"). For his latest work, a black-and-white film called "Untouched by the West," he returns to the Sahara to follow a solitary hunter through the serene vastness. (BAM Rose Cinemas, starts April 1; see Movies.)



Brice Marden reads during "Poetry & the Creative Mind," at Alice Tully Hall.



Raymond Depardon's "Untouched by the West," at BAM Rose Cinemas.



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Mike Patton and his band Fantômas descend upon Irving Plaza.

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OPENINGS AND PREVIEWS

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ASSASSINS
The Roundabout Theatre Company presents the first Broadway production of Stephen Sondheim and John Weidman's musical about nine men and women who killed or tried to kill American Presidents. With Neil Patrick Harris as Lee Harvey Oswald, Michael Cerveris as John Wilkes Booth, and Mary Catherine Garrison as Lynette (Squeaky) Fromme. Directed by Joe Mantello. Previews begin March 31. (Studio 54, at 254 W. 54th St. 212-239-6200.)

Following the release of their major-label début, "Bows + Arrows," New York City's Walkmen play Irving Plaza on April 1.

JASON TODD

BETWEEN US
A kind of contemporary "Big Chill," written by Joe Hortua and directed by Christopher Ashley. With David Harbour, Daphne Rubin-Vega, Kate Jennings Grant, and Bradley White. A Manhattan Theatre Club production. Previews begin April 1. (City Center, 131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212.)

BOMBAY DREAMS
A. R. Rahman's lavish musical about an Indian slumdweller who wants to become a Bollywood star, which has been a hit in London for two years, comes to New York. Based on an idea by Andrew Lloyd Webber and Shekhar Kapur, with a book by Thomas Meehan ("Hairspray") and Meera Syal and music by Rahman. In previews. (Broadway, 1681 Broadway, at 53rd St. 212-239-6200.)

HANNAH & MARTIN
Kate Fodor's play about the relationship between Hannah Arendt and Martin Heidegger, Arendt's onetime philosophy professor and lover, stars David Strathairn and Melissa Friedman. Directed by Ron Russell. A production of the Epic Theatre Center. Opens March 31 at 6:30. (Manhattan Ensemble Theatre, 55 Mercer St. 212-279-4200.)

INTIMATE APPAREL
The Roundabout presents a new play by Lynn Nottage, set in 1905, about an African-American lingerie seamstress who puts her business at risk when she marries a mysterious stranger from the Caribbean. Directed by Daniel Sullivan. In previews. (Laura Pels, 111 W. 46th St. 212-719-1300.)

JUMPERS
Simon Russell Beale and Essie Davis lead the cast in a revival of Tom Stoppard's comic, philosophical murder mystery, from 1972. Directed by David Leveaux. Previews begin April 6. (Brooks Atkinson, 256 W. 47th St. 212-307-7171.)

MATCH
In a new play by Stephen Belber ("Tape"), starring Frank Langella, Ray Liotta, and Jane Adams, a husband and wife interview a once famous dancer about his past. Directed by Nicholas Martin. In previews. (Plymouth, 236 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

MR. FOX: A RUMINATION
The final offering of the Signature Theatre Company's Bill Irwin season is a reflection on the life of the celebrated clown George L. Fox (1825-77). Directed by James Houghton. In previews. (Peter Norton Space, 555 W. 42nd St. 212-244-7529.)

MRS. FARNSWORTH
Electoral politics are the focus of a new comedy by A. R. Gurney that stars Sigourney Weaver, John Lithgow, and Danny Burstein. Directed by Jim Simpson. In previews. (Flea, 41 White St. 212-352-3101.)

A RAISIN IN THE SUN
Sean (P. Diddy) Combs, Audra McDonald, and Phylicia Rashad star in a revival of Lorraine Hansberry's play about three generations of a family who live under the same roof on the South Side of Chicago. Directed by Kenny Leon. In previews. (Royale, 242 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

ROAR
In a new play by Betty Shamieh ("Chocolate in Heat"), set in Detroit after the first Gulf War, a Palestinian-American family takes in a relative who has come from Kuwait. Directed by Marion McClinton. In previews. (Clurman, 410 W. 42nd St. 212-239-6200.)

7-ELEVEN FRANCHISED
The South Asian-American troupe Desipina & Company presents seven plays, each of them eleven minutes long and set in a convenience store. Directed by Gita Reddy. Opens April 1 at 8. (Tenement Theatre, 97 Orchard St. 800-965-4827.)

SIXTEEN WOUNDED
A new play by Eliam Kraiem about a friendship between a Jewish baker and a young Palestinian man, with Judd Hirsch, Martha Plimpton, Omar Metwally, and Jan Maxwell. Directed by Garry Hynes. In previews. (Walter Kerr, 219 W. 48th St. 212-239-6200.)

SLY FOX
Arthur Penn directs a revival of Larry Gelbart's comedy, an update of Ben Jonson's "Volpone" that transplants the action to Gold Rush-era San Francisco. With Richard Dreyfuss, Eric Stoltz, and Elizabeth Berkley. Two previews on March 31. Opens April 1 at 6:45. (Barrymore, 243 W. 47th St. 212-239-6200.)

THE TROJAN WOMEN
The Classical Theatre of Harlem presents a revival of Euripides' tragedy, adapted and directed by Alfred Preisser. Previews begin April 1. Opens April 2 at 8. (HSA Theatre, 645 St. Nicholas Ave., near 141st St. 212-868-4444.)

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WHEN WE DEAD AWAKEN
Ibsen's last play, directed by Benno Haenel at the Pearl Theatre Company. In previews. Opens April 4 at 7. (80 St. Marks Place. 212-598-9802.)

OPENED RECENTLY

ACCIDENTAL NOSTALGIA
Cynthia Hopkins, best known for her band, Gloria Deluxe, which showcases her Patsy Cline-meets-Patti Smith vocals, presents a fantastical alt-country operetta about an amnesiac obsessed by her past. Choreographed by Jordana Toback and directed by DJ Mendel. (St. Ann's Warehouse, 38 Water St., Dumbo, Brooklyn. 718-254-8779. Through April 4.)

BIG BILL
A. R. Gurney's gallant new play, ably directed by Mark Lamos, explores the duality of the character of the historic tennis player Bill Tilden—genial, masculine sports hero versus sensitive and optimistic Peter Pan—in a series of scenes that shift in perspective with near-cinematic fluidity. John Michael Higgins, who plays Tilden, is a wonderful actor, bathed in a quiet and respectable kind of decency. You can tell that he's thrilled by the emotional trajectories that Gurney gives him to play with. Still, his characterization is flawed in exactly the way that this moving play is flawed: by too much politesse and not enough cringe-inducing darkness. (Reviewed in our issue of 3/15/04.) (Mitzi E. Newhouse, Lincoln Center. 212-239-6200.)

BRIDGE & TUNNEL
Sarah Jones, a sort of multicultural mynah bird, lays our mongrel nation before us with gorgeous, pitch-perfect impersonations. (3/8/04) (45 Bleecker Street Theatre, at 45 Bleecker St. 212-307-4100.)

BUG
In this dark new comedy by Tracy Letts, Agnes (Shannon Cochran), hiding out from her violent ex-con ex-husband in an Oklahoma City hotel room, falls for a handsome drifter (Michael Shannon) with a conspiracy theory: he believes the authorities have planted bugs under his skin. With sterling performances by Cochran and Shannon (both of whom look terrific naked, which they are at length) and by Michael Cullen, as the frightening ex-husband. The director, Dexter Bullard, keeps up the suspense all the way through. (Barrow Street Theatre, 27 Barrow St., at Seventh Ave. 212-239-6200.)

CIRQUE JACQUELINE
Andrea Reese channels Jackie O. in this one-woman show. Making the most of her physical resemblance to the former First Lady—fair skin, a voluptuous mouth, and thick, dark hair, worn in a bouffant—she plays her as a capricious little girl who wants to join the circus, as a jealous wife, and as a plucky widow and cancer patient. The upshot is a character of both charm and substance. Charles Messina directs. (Triad, 158 W. 72nd St. 212-352-3101. Closes April 21.)

EARS ON A BEATLE
Dan Lauria and Bill Dawes portray two undercover F.B.I. agents who conduct surveillance on John Lennon in the nineteen-seventies. Written and directed by Mark St. Germain ("Camping with Henry and Tom"). (DR2, at 103 E. 15th St. 212-239-6200.)

EMBEDDED
Tim Robbins is an intellectual sentimentalist—an actor and director whose political preoccupations are always sympathetic but do not necessarily add up to art. Here he has written and directed a series of sketches about young men and women who have been sent to Iraq and the political machinations that got them there. Robbins employs masks, costumes, video projections, and music to get his point across, and by the time the ninety-minute piece is over, you feel as if an axe dipped in political correctness has been wedged into the back of your neck. (3/29/04) (Public, 425 Lafayette St. 212-239-6200.)

FIDDLER ON THE ROOF
In this elegant revival, the star (Alfred Molina), the director (David Leveaux), the costume designer (Vicki Mortimer), and the set designer (Tom Pye) are English; they bring to the production a certain cultural detachment, which imposes a powerful lucidity on the story and allows its moral debate to gather proper poetic momentum. Every well-sculpted second has within it a sense of both regret and release, which makes the comic and tragic elements of the story at once nostalgic, evergreen, and adult. (3/8/04) (Minskoff, 200 W. 45th St. 212-307-4100.)

FROM DOOR TO DOOR
A comedy about smothering mothers and single parenthood by James Sherman ("Beau Jest"). Directed by Joe Brancato. (Westside, 407 W. 43rd St. 212-239-6200.)

FROZEN
In Bryony Lavery's extremely well-crafted play, Swoosie Kurtz plays Nancy, a mother who walks about in a stunned silence brought on by the kidnapping and murder of her little girl by a pedophile named Ralph (the brilliant Brian F. O'Byrne). The abduction occurred twenty years earlier, but Nancy is defined by mourning—frozen by grief. Set in present-day England, the play is essentially a series of monologues describing the locked-in lives of Nancy, Ralph, and a criminologist named Agnethe (Laila Robins), who has come from the United States to deliver lectures on the characteristics of the criminal mind. Robins has a deadpan focus and a passion for acting, but she's no showoff. Kurtz can say nothing and speak volumes by shifting slightly in her seat. O'Byrne, on the other hand, is all physicality, alternately timid and intimidating. Directed by Doug Hughes. (3/29/04) (MCC at East Thirteenth Street Theatre, 136 E. 13th St. 212-279-4200.)

THE JOURNALS OF MIHAIL SEBASTIAN
Stephen Kunken stars in a play about the life and times of the Romanian novelist and playwright, adapted by David Auburn ("Proof") from the diaries that Sebastian wrote during the Second World War. A Keen Company production. Directed by Carl Forsman. (Theatre at 45th Street, 354 W. 45th St. 212-868-4444.)

THE LIFE OF SPIDERS
In a new play by Kelly Stuart, a Frenchman hits Belle Époque Paris with a fabric made from spider's silk, which he hopes will win him social entrée. Directed by Rebecca Holderness, of the Holderness Theatre Company. (Culture Project, 45 Bleecker St. 212-352-3101.)

THE MOONLIGHT ROOM
Tristine Skyler's critically lauded play, about two teen-agers at a hospital who are waiting for news about a friend who has overdosed, has reopened on Theatre Row. Directed by Jeff Cohen. (Beckett, 410 W. 42nd St. 212-239-6200.)

MY KITCHEN WARS
Dorothy Lyman stars in her adaptation of Betty Fussell's memoir about her thirty-year marriage to the Princeton professor Paul Fussell. Directed by Elinor Renfield. (78th Street Theatre Lab, 236 W. 78th St. 212-868-4444.)

OPEN HEART
Robby Benson ("Ice Castles") wrote the book, score, and lyrics for this new musical comedy about open-heart surgery, in which he also stars. He has undergone the procedure twice. Directed by Matt Williams. (Cherry Lane, 38 Commerce St. 212-239-6200.)

POOR THEATER
The Wooster Group presents a work in progress. (Performing Garage, 33 Wooster St. 212-966-3651.)

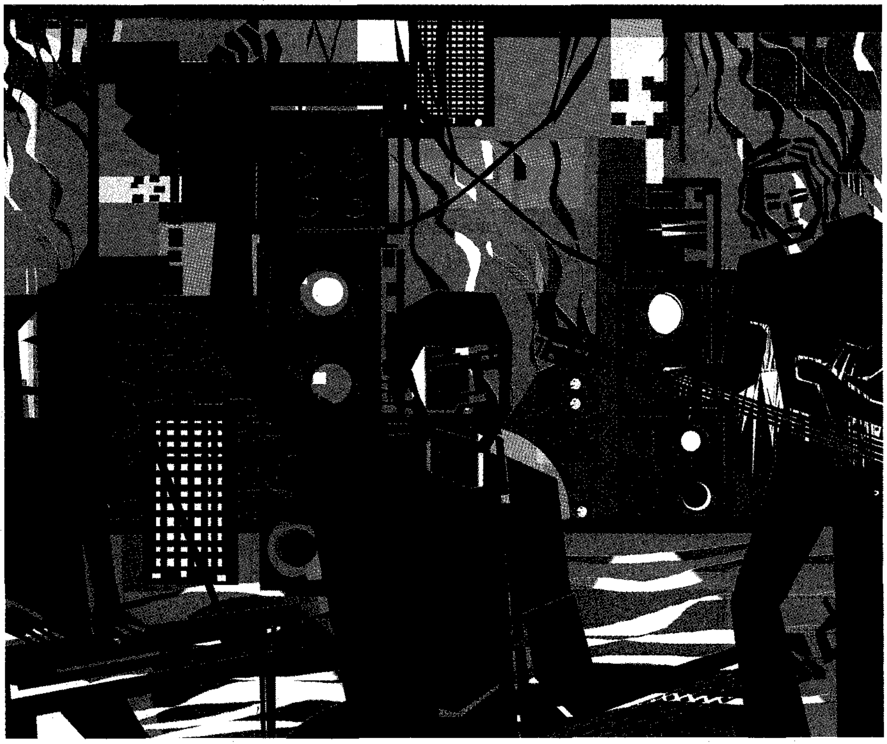
SARAH, SARAH
A new play by Daniel Goldfarb, set in Canada in 1961 and in China in 2001, about an immigrant woman who opposes her son's marriage. J. Smith-Cameron plays the matriarch in the first act and her granddaughter in the second. Directed by Mark Nelson. (Manhattan Theatre Club at City Center, 131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212.)

SILENT LAUGHTER
A farce inspired by silent movies, performed by a cast of ten and accompanied by movie-house organ music, written by Billy Van Zandt and Jane Milmore. Van Zandt directs. (Lamb's Theatre, 130 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200.)

THE STENDHAL SYNDROME
In Terrence McNally's twin bill at Primary Stages, the playwright displays his narrative skill, his sense of fun, his love of music, and his ability to turn a threadbare trope into a surprising, complex gesture. (3/1/04) (59E59 Theatre, 59 E. 59th St. 212-279-4200.)

TWENTIETH CENTURY
Alec Baldwin and Anne Heche lead the cast in the Roundabout Theatre's revival of Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur's comedy about a theatre producer and the waitress he turned into a leading lady. Directed by Walter Bobbie. (Reviewed in this issue.) (American Airlines Theatre, 227 W. 42nd St. 212-719-1300.)

WAVE
In a new play by Sung Rno, directed by Will Pomerantz ("Tatjana in Color"), an Asian-American family is bedevilled by a fascination with fame and firearms. A Ma-Yi Theatre Company production. (Ohio Theatre, 66 Wooster St. 212-352-3101.)



Mixel Pixel brings its multimedia show to Pianos on April 4 (see Night Life).

KIM DEMARCO

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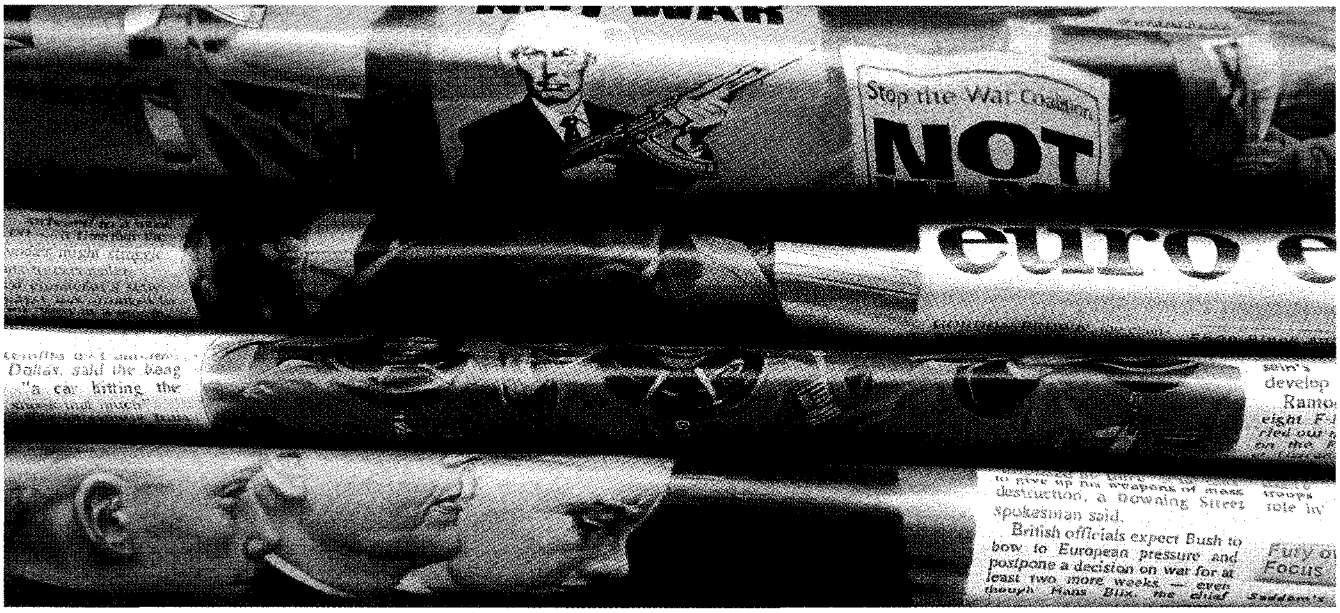
WELL
Lisa Kron presents a new play, a "solo show with some other people in it," in her trademark wry, garrulous vein. Directed by Leigh Silverman. (Reviewed in this issue.) (Public, 425 Lafayette St. 212-239-6200.)

YEARDLEY SMITH: MORE
Smith, the actress who provides the voice of Lisa on "The Simpsons," is ruefully winsome in her confessional one-woman show about the ups and (mostly) downs of her acting career and her lifelong struggle with bulimia and depression. Directed by Judith Ivey. (Union Square Theatre, 100 E. 17th St. 212-307-7171.)

DANCE

"IT TAKES TWO"
American Ballet Theatre's Studio Company prepares young dancers to enter A.B.T. and serves as a forum for emerging choreographers. It has become a breeding ground for ballet stars, such as the recently promoted soloist David Hallberg. The troupe makes its Joyce Theatre début with Ashton's "Monotones" and Balanchine's daredevil "Tarantella," honoring the choreographers' shared centennial. There are also two world premières: Laura G. Miller's playful "Milk Pool," which takes musical and atmospheric cues from Pedro Almodóvar, and Brian Reeder's busy "Staged Fright," which is informed by Hitchcock films. The young, energetic dancers of the Ailey II company share the program and also make their Joyce débuts, presenting works by modern choreographers. (175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 212-242-0800. April 1-2 at 8, April 3 at 2 and 8, and April 4 at 2 and 7:30.)


Stop the War Coalition
NOT
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Dallas, said the
"a car hitting the
destruction, a Downing Street spokesman said.
British officials expect Bush to bow to European pressure and postpone a decision on war for at least two more weeks — even though Hans Blix, the chief

"January-February 2003, L. T.," one of Xiaoze Xie's paintings of stacks of newspapers at Charles Cowles (see Art).

COMPAGNIE MAGUY MARIN
The French company presents the evening-length work "One Can't Eat Applause," which is intended as an indictment of postindustrial commercialization but is pretty to look at, if repetitive, and might more aptly be titled "Showdown at Sherwin-Williams." Nine dancers push through a curtain of colored plastic strips, shoulder-butting one another and occasionally stopping in freeze-frames. (Joyce Theatre, 175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 212-242-0800. April 6 at 8. Through April 11.)

"DECAY OF THE ANGEL"
Maureen Fleming, perhaps the foremost American practitioner of Butoh, specializes in metamorphoses, transforming her body with agonizing slowness. In an ecstatic new work at La Mama Annex, she draws on the ancient Japanese tale of a fisherman who finds a piece of an angel's wing caught on a branch and refuses to return it until the angel shows him a celestial dance. Using film and images by Lois Greenfield, photographs of the ikebana flower arrangements of Gaho Taniguchi, and a score by Philip Glass, Fleming creates the angel's dance. (66 E. 4th St. 212-475-7710. April 1-3 at 7:30 and April 4 at 2:30 and 7:30.)

DANCE THEATRE WORKSHOP
"Acre," Brian Brooks's multimedia meditation on the color green, shares the bill with Julie Atlas Muz's take on Stravinsky's "The Rite of Spring," which makes psychosexual allusions that include O'Keeffian blooms, high-school hazing rituals, and child beauty pageants. The Butcher Shop Quartet plays a live rock rendition of the score. (219 W. 19th St. 212-924-0077. April 2-3 at 7; with a student matinée on April 2 at noon.)

HUMAN FUTURE DANCE CORPS
In "Coming Out of the Night with Names," Peter Jacobs, DD Dorvillier, Oren Bar-noy and Heather Kravas explore every corner of P.S. 122—from the stage to the hallways and bathrooms—in their search for a mysterious missing man. With a video by Molly Davies and live guitar and electronic music by Kenta and Michelle Nagai. (150 First Ave., at 9th St. 212-477-5288. April 1-3 at 7:30 and April 4 at 5. Through April 11.)

"IMPROVISIONS"
The French-Moroccan dancer Roxane Butterfly returns to Symphony Space with her freestyle-tap and hip-hop ensemble Beauteez'n the Beat, featuring the street dancer Miss Twist, the guest tappers Hannah Leah and Tina Pratt, and Butterfly herself. With Graham Haynes on cornet, performing original music. (Broadway at 95th St. 212-864-5400. April 1-2 at 8:30.)

"MILAGRO"
This high-minded, high-speed piece by the longtime collaborators Patricia Hoffbauer and George Emilio Sanchez makes use of language, dance, and theatre. The performers travel between imaginary places, attempting to break down boundaries of time and space while searching for meeting points. The vaudevillian antics are only slightly amusing. Part of Dance Theatre Workshop's "Carnival" festival. (219 W. 19th St. 212-924-0077. March 31 and April 1 at 7. Through April 10.)

HARKNESS DANCE CENTER: "SUNDAYS@3"
Lynn Parkerson, the director of the two-year-old Brooklyn Ballet, takes on the story of Christ's birth, death, and resurrection in "The Mystery Sonatas," an hour-long work set to the violin sonatas of the seventeenth-century composer Heinrich Biber. The dancers weave gestures derived from the American Sign Language version of the Rosary prayers into the performance. They are accompanied by the violinist Gil Morgenstern. (92nd Street Y, Lexington Ave. at 92nd St. 212-415-5500. April 4 at 3.)

"SALT CHOCOLATE"
A new work by Gabrielle Lansner & Company incorporates text taken from testimony to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission and from the short story "Do You Remember Helena Lem?," by the Afrikaner poet Ina Rousseau. (Duke on 42nd St., 229 W. 42nd St. 212-239-6200. April 1-2 at 8, April 3 at 2 and 8, and April 4 at 2.)

"FOUR WALLS"
The Korean choreographer and dancer Sin Cha Hong performs an adaptation of the 1944 collaboration between John Cage and Merce Cunningham, accompanied by Joseph Kubera on piano. (Tishman Auditorium, New School, 66 W. 12th St. 212-229-5488. April 1 at 7.)

NIGHT LIFE
CONCERTS

VAN MORRISON
The Caledonian soul man's latest album, "What's Wrong with This Picture?," is his first for Blue Note and one of his strongest collections in years. (Theatre at Madison Square Garden. 212-307-7171. March 31 at 7.)

THE RAPTURE
The work of this quartet from New York, which borrows liberally from Public Image Ltd., Gang of Four, and the Cure, is so close to the danceable post-punk of the early eighties that it borders on parody. The group's latest album, "Echoes," recalls sweaty nights at the Mudd Club during the waning days of the Carter Administration. **Black Rebel Motorcycle Club,** which swaps dance grooves for post-punk's darker, grittier side, opens the evening. (Roseland, 239 W. 52nd St. 212-307-7171. March 31 at 7:30.)

THE POLYPHONIC SPREE
Led by the former Tripping Daisy singer Tim DeLaughter, the Spree is a twenty-plus-member outfit from Austin that favors relentlessly positive harmonizing and long white robes. (Angel Orensanz Center, 172 Norfolk St., between Houston and Stanton Sts. 212-307-7171. March 31 at 8.)

WORLD MUSIC INSTITUTE
April 2-3 at 8: Two nights of Indian music, with **Ravikiran** and **Shashank** (playing the rarely heard *gottuvadyam*, or fretless lute, and the *venu*, or bamboo flute, respectively) on the first night and the vocalist **Lakshmi Shankar** and the tabla players

Shweta Jhaveri and **Anuradha Pal** on the second. (Symphony Space, Broadway at 95th St. For more information, call 212-545-7536.)

LIZ PHAIR
The onetime belle of the indie underground went mainstream last year with her eponymous fourth album (thanks in part to the help of the hit-making producers the Matrix). (Roseland. April 3 at 6:45.)

CLUBS

Musicians and night-club proprietors live complicated lives; it's advisable to call ahead to confirm engagements.

BARBÈS
376 9th St., Park Slope, Brooklyn (718-965-9177)—April 2: The eclectic Brooklyn-based group **Piñataland** has an obsession with obscure, often bizarre, corners of twentieth-century history; their record "Songs for the Forgotten Future, Vol. 1" has tunes about Mathias Rust, the German teen-ager who was arrested after he landed a one-engine plane in Red Square, and Ota Benga, the Congolese Pygmy who was put on display with the monkeys in the Bronx Zoo.

B. B. KING BLUES CLUB & GRILL
237 W. 42nd St. (212-997-4144)—April 5: **Madvillain** is a collaboration between the mysterious rapper MF Doom (as in "Metal Face Doom") who wears, naturally, a metal mask, and Madlib, a d.j. who recently remixed the Blue Note back catalogue, at the request of the label. They record on Stones Throw, the imprint run by their friend and fellow-d.j. **Peanut Butter Wolf.**

BOWERY BALLROOM
6 Delancey St. (212-533-2111)—April 1-2: **Train,** an unlikely success story from San Francisco, plays funkless and familiar rock, in the fashion of a less edgy Matchbox Twenty. April 4: The **Distillers** are a punk-revival band led by the comely, if cartoonish Brody Dalle. Their latest album, "Coral Fang," flirts with pop.

FEZ
380 Lafayette St. (212-533-7000)—March 31: Ten years ago the Australian group **Frente!** grazed the charts with an acoustic rendition of New Order's "Bizarre Love Triangle." The **Mingus Big Band** still packs them in every Thursday. Dining.

IRVING PLAZA
17 Irving Pl., at 15th St. (212-777-6800)—March 31: The infectious post-punk of New York's **Stellastar*.** With the soaring vocals and swirling guitars of **Ambulance LTD.** April 1: Thanks to the plaintive growl of the lead vocalist, Hamilton Leithauser, the velveteen lushness of the organist, Walter Martin, and a stylishly dishevelled production aesthetic, the **Walkmen** have long since eclipsed the buzz of their core members' previous outfit, Jonathan Fire*Eater. Their major-label début, "Bows + Arrows," finds them tighter and more polished than they've ever been. April 5: **Fantômas** (see This Week). With **Melt Banana.**

LIVING ROOM
154 Ludlow St. (212-533-7235)—**Dennis Brennan** was once a fixture on the Boston rock scene, but more recently he's been in Williamsburg at Pete's Candy Store, where during the past few months he and his band could be found on Thursday nights. On March 31, they venture into Manhattan for a night that also includes Brennan's friend **Paul Bryan,** who is celebrating the release of his new album, "Handcuff King," and the soft-voiced singer-songwriter **Amy Correa.**

MERCURY LOUNGE
217 E. Houston St. (212-260-4700)—March 31-April 1: The **Sleepy Jackson,** the brainchild of the Australian musician Luke Steele, serves up a diverse cross section of pop. Everything from lush strings to country-inflected vocals shows up on the band's album "Lovers." April 5: The vocalist and guitarist Josh Homme has been busy lately, even though his stoner-rock group Queens of the Stone Age recently lost the bassist Nick Oliveri and the vocalist Mark Lanegan. His side project, the **Eagles of Death Metal,** plays a blend of not entirely serious garage boogie, with Homme on drums, no less.

NORTHSIX
66 N. 6th St., Williamsburg, Brooklyn (718-599-5103)—April 3: **Eagles of Death Metal** (see the Mercury Lounge). April 5: In the early nineties, Seattle's **Posies** pushed harmony-laden power pop while the rest of their city went grunge. The nation went grunge as well, leaving the Posies little more than a loyal cult following. The group rewards devoted fans with a reunion appearance.

PIANOS
158 Ludlow St. (212-505-3733)—April 2: The **Killowhatthours** established themselves on the indie-rock circuit by weaving piano riffs into their songs. The group traded the piano for a synthesizer on their second album, 2002's "The Bright Side." April 4: The New York collective **Mixel Pixel** combines a self-taping aesthetic (they got their start when two friends began mailing home-made cassettes to each other) with a video-game mentality. In concert, their experimental soundscapes are enhanced with video projections.

SIN-É
150 Attorney St. (212-388-0077)—April 1: A night of music from the outer edges of creativity. **Songs from a Random House,** whose principal songwriter studied with the composer Morton Feldman, play tunes with unusual instrumentation—two ukuleles, a viola, and an upright bass. Chicago's **Butchershop Quartet** has the shortest set list in history: Igor Stravinsky's seasonally appropriate "The Rite of Spring." Expect a fierce rendition, arranged for two guitars, bass, and drums. Brooklyn's **Barbez,** which includes a theremin player and a full-throated Russian singer, performs haunting originals and covers material ranging from Bertolt Brecht to Black Sabbath. The instrumental quartet **Shot'nez** features Ori Kaplan's high-energy saxophone and Stephen Ulrich's noirish guitar. April 2: The punkish roots-rockers the **Damnwells** celebrate the release of their new album, "Bastards of the Beat," which was recorded in a Manhattan storage locker. With **Gingersol** and **Maplewood.**

TONIC
107 Norfolk St. (212-358-7503)—March 31: **Scott McCloud,** of Girls Against Boys, plays a solo set. The **Gleaners** and **Johnny Tirado** share the bill.

WARSAW
261 Driggs Ave., Brooklyn (718-387-0505)—April 3: The **Twilight Singers** are led by Greg Dulli, of the late Cincinnati white-boy funk combo the Afghan Whigs.

JAZZ AND STANDARDS

BLUE NOTE
131 W. 3rd St., near Sixth Ave. (212-475-8592)—Through April 3: Like his fellow septuagenarian drummer Elvin Jones, **Roy Haynes** still plays with the brilliance and drive that made him a powerhouse decades ago.

CARLYLE HOTEL
Madison Ave. at 76th St. (212-744-1600)—The Café Carlyle, a snug, windowless enclave in the doorman district, features discreet waiters, wraparound murals, and, through May 1, **Maria Friedman.**

DANNY'S
346 W. 46th St. (212-265-8133)—Mondays through May 3: The vocalist **Maude Maggart,** the sister of Fiona Apple, takes patrons back to Prohibition-era New York.

FEINSTEIN'S AT THE REGENCY
540 Park Ave., at 61st St. (212-339-4095)—Through April 3: The sisters **Ann Hampton Callaway** and **Liz Callaway** share Tony nominations and lifetimes devoted to song.

IRIDIUM
1650 Broadway, at 51st St. (212-582-2121)—Through April 4: The **Art Ensemble of Chicago** marches on, minus its longtime bassist, the late

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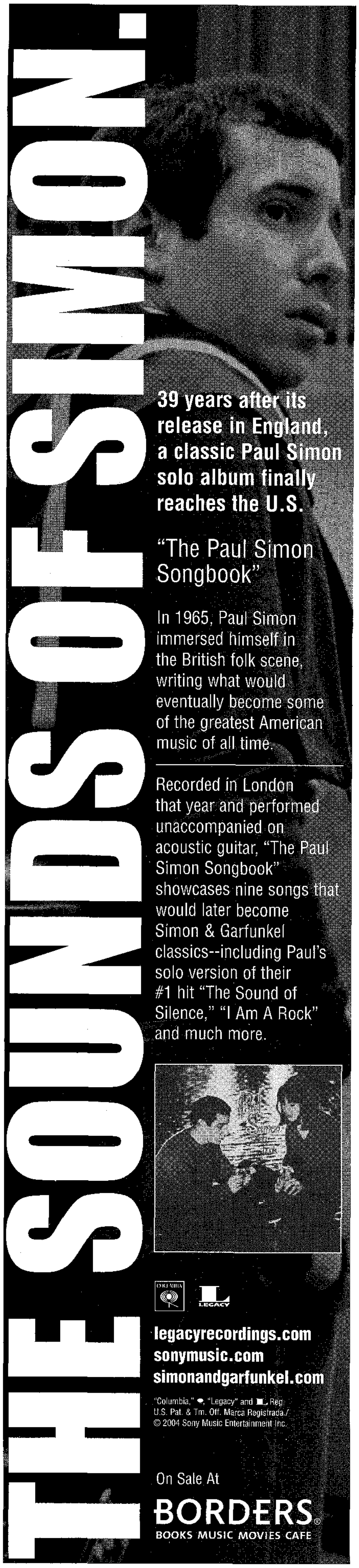
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Malachi Favors. The original members Roscoe Mitchell, Joseph Jarman, and Don Moye are joined by two guests: Corey Wilkes, on trumpet, and Jaribu Shahid, on bass. Mondays belong to the electric-guitar innovator Les Paul.

LE JAZZ AU BAR
41 E. 58th St. (212-308-9455)—April 1-4: **Carmen Lundy,** a beguiling singer who deserves wider recognition, performs with the eloquent saxophonist **Mark Shim.**

JAZZ STANDARD
116 E. 27th St. (212-576-2232)—April 1-4: The Chilean vocalist **Claudia Acuña** plays songs from her new album, "Luna." April 5 and Mondays: **Steve Bernstein's Millennial Territory Orchestra.**

UP OVER JAZZ CAFÉ
351 Flatbush Ave., at Seventh Ave., Brooklyn (718-398-5413)—April 2-3: **Adonis Rose,** a smart young drummer on the rise, leads a quintet featuring the passionate tenor saxophonist **David Sanchez.**

VILLAGE VANGUARD
178 Seventh Ave. S., at 11th St. (212-255-4037)—Through April 4: Jazz foot soldiers rarely rise out of the trenches and make a place for themselves, but **Jerry Dodgion's** time has come. His Joy of Sax band turns the spotlight on a hardworking saxophonist who has fortified bands both big and small for fifty-odd years. The **Vanguard Jazz Orchestra** holds sway on Mondays.

ART
MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. (212-879-5500)—The name Chuck Close instantly conjures images of giant gridded portraits, tight and deadpan in Photo-Realist black-and-white in the seventies, with more recent versions dissolving into loose lozenges of color. **"Chuck Close Prints: Process and Collaboration"** shows that all the portraiture of self and others went along with constant experiments in the practice of printmaking. Etchings, silk screens, linoleum and woodblock prints, and hand-constructed pulp-paper multiples are tracked through various proof states, and actual woodblocks, etched copper panels, and other studio paraphernalia also appear. Through April 18. ♦ Terra-cotta models were sculptors' preparatory sketches, clay versions of what would later be carved from stone. More than a hundred of them are on view in **"Playing with Fire: European Terracotta Models, 1740-1840,"** including diminutive works by Flaxman, Houdon, and Clodion. The eighteenth-century art star Antonio Canova's models—he called them *invenzioni*—are among the roughest and most spontaneous. His "Penitent Magdalen" and "Lamentation Over the Dead Abel" show what his sublime marbles never could: the hand of the artist and the heat of inspiration, captured forever in hasty tool marks and globs of modelled clay. Through April 25. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, 9:30 to 5:30, and Friday and Saturday evenings until 9.)

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART (MOMA QNS)
33rd St. at Queens Blvd., Long Island City (212-708-9400)—**"Roth Time,"** a gargantuan retrospective of the late, underknown German-Swiss artist Dieter Roth, holds sway at MOMA and in a smaller show at its affiliate, P.S. 1. Imagine Robert Rauschenberg, Yves Klein, and Joseph Beuys rolled into one and thrown against a wall. Roth emerged after the Second World War as a gifted draftsman à la Paul Klee, proceeded through phases of inventive geometric and kinetic work, and then, influenced by Jean Tinguely and Fluxus, became an installational wild man, using innumerable mediums (frequently, cast chocolate) to colonize the world with a kind of participatory narcissism. Did Roth liberate his considerable talent, or did he trash it? Through June 7. (Open Thursdays through Mondays, 10 to 5, and Friday evenings until 7:45.)

GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 89th St. (212-423-3500)—**"Singular Forms (Sometimes Repeated)"** fills the museum with classic minimalist and post-minimalist art of the last half-century, exalting what is still the chief aesthetic of our age. Emphasizing "reductive" sensibility—a qualifier rarely used since the nineteen-sixties—the curators smooth over theoretical antagonisms between sculpture (Judd, Andre, Flavin) and painting (Kelly, Ryman, Marden), thus giving weight to latter-day hybrid modes (Richter, Ray, Gober). Californian hedonism (Irwin, Turrell, McCracken) registers as strongly as phenomenological tough stuff (Morris, Serra, Nauman). Sumptuously seductive for all its austerities, the show reminds us that minimalism brought about a revolution in the decorative arts. Through May 19. (Open Saturdays through Wednesdays, 10 to 5:45, and Fridays, 10 to 8.)

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART
Madison Ave. at 75th St. (212-570-3676)—A startlingly good Biennial banishes the gloom that has long beset the Whitney's programs on contemporary art. Painting and drawing reign. Handmade pictures exercise a gravitational tug on practically everything in the show, including sculptures, installations, videos, photographs, films, and digital animation. Paintings by younger artists like Elizabeth Peyton, Laura Owens, and Lecia Dole-Recio exchange energy with those by veterans like David Hockney, Mel Bochner, and Robert Mangold. Video installation emerges as a fully mature art form in strong works by Catherine Sullivan, Craigie Horsfield, Eve Sussman, and Slater Bradley. Installational hybrids of painting and sculpture—dominant in the last decade—show signs of exhaustion; an exception is a delightful neo-psychedelic disco by a group called assume vivid astro focus. Through May 30. (Open Wednesdays through Thursdays, and weekends, 11 to 6, and Fridays, 1 to 9.)

POP NOTES

HOME OF THE BRAVES
It remains to be seen whether OutKast's outsized success will eclipse other Atlanta soul acts or pull them into the spotlight. The latest postulant is Cee-Lo Green, né Thomas Callaway, who has just released his second album, **"Cee-Lo Green . . . Is the Soul Machine"** (Arista). In the group Goodie Mob, Cee-Lo was one of the true originals of Southern hip-hop, a nasal, hyperactive rapper-singer with an abiding interest in spacey funk. He hasn't exactly returned to earth on his new record, but he has hired a number of top-flight pop producers, including the Neptunes, Timbaland, and DJ Premier. The Neptunes man the boards for the first (and strongest) song, "The Art of Noise," on which Cee-Lo muses about the philosophical function of music. The collaboration with Timbaland, "I'll Be Around," moves along on an irresistible wood-block rhythm track. Throughout, Cee-Lo makes a strong bid to succeed OutKast's André 3000 as the next great Southern eccentric.

The twenty-six-year-old singer and songwriter Van Hunt, who now hails from Atlanta, is a bona-fide soul man, if not exactly an original. On his eponymous début (Capitol), he channels Curtis Mayfield, Smokey Robinson, and Stevie Wonder, among others, putting on so many different faces that he risks being faceless. Hunt is more impressive as an arranger and songwriter. On songs like "Dust" and "Highlights," he acquits himself admirably as a smooth melodist and idiosyncratic lyricist; "Down Here in Hell (With You)" takes romantic pessimism to new heights—or depths. Now and then, his music comes off as poor-cousin Prince or slightly less eccentric Terence Trent D'Arby, and only time will tell if this is a curious one-off or the beginning of a beautiful career.

—Ben Greenman

AMERICAN FOLK ART MUSEUM
45 W. 53rd St. (212-265-1040)— Under cover of utility and thrift, quilting has historically offered women space to exercise otherwise frustrated aesthetic urges. Geometry and color are typical formal concerns, but the textiles in **"Talking Quilts"**—dating from 1848 to 1998—foreground language. An anonymous quilter of the eighteen-eighties, for example, quoted John 6:12, "Gather up the fragments that nothing be lost," in scraps of calico, while Lena Moore of Canton, Mississippi, worked the 23rd Psalm into a pulsating pattern of red on white, circa 1930. Then there's Lavinia Rose of Cortlandville, New York, who stitched a note advising Bible study for her son's marriage bed and signed it "Mother." Through Aug. 1. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, 10:30 to 5:30, and Friday evenings until 7:30.)

FRICK COLLECTION
1 E. 70th St. (212-288-0700)—**"A Beautiful and Gracious Manner: The Art of Parmigianino."** Through April 16. (Open Tuesdays through Saturdays, 10 to 6; Friday evenings until 9; and Sundays, 1 to 6.)

NEW MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART
583 Broadway (212-219-1222)—Darkened galleries at the New Museum (which will close in May in preparation for the move to a new building) are lined with flat-screen monitors running videos commissioned for **"Point of View: An Anthology of the Moving Image."** Isaac Julien's "Encore" combines images of the sea and islands with a voice-over by the poet Derek Walcott reading from his epic poem "Omeros"; in Francis Alys's "El Gringo," stray dogs snarl and snap at the camera. Other artists include Joan Jonas and William Kentridge, both of whom are better represented in current solo shows elsewhere. A handsome DVD set accompanies the show, but these are mostly second-rate videos by first-rate artists. Through May 2. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, noon to 6, and Thursdays, noon to 8.)

GALLERIES—UPTOWN

Unless otherwise noted, galleries are open Tuesdays through Saturdays, from around 10 or 11 to between 5 and 6.

GLENN BROWN
Virtuosic paintings that combine Old Master sources with the existential grotesquerie of Francis Bacon. A Van Dyck painting becomes a psychedelic self-portrait with glazed eyes and swirling, multihued skin. A fetching Fragonard lass looks like a victim of consumption. Brown's panels appear painterly, but it's a ruse; at close range the surfaces are as slick as airbrushed ads. Paradoxically, his sculptures take painterliness to extremes. Brown's deranged take on art history makes John Currin's narratives look tame. Through April 10. (Gagosian, 980 Madison Ave., at 76th St. 212-744-2313.)

DAVID HOCKNEY
An exhibition of a famous artist's doodled portraits of his friends can be either charmingly cozy or annoyingly limited. The annoyed may feel that, while Hockney's characterizations are witty and his handling of ink and watercolor magisterially relaxed, there is little psychological penetration or gestural acuity. The charmed may feel that the enjoyment of polite leisure is satisfying enough. Through April 16. (Richard Gray, 1018 Madison Ave., at 78th St. 212-472-8787.)

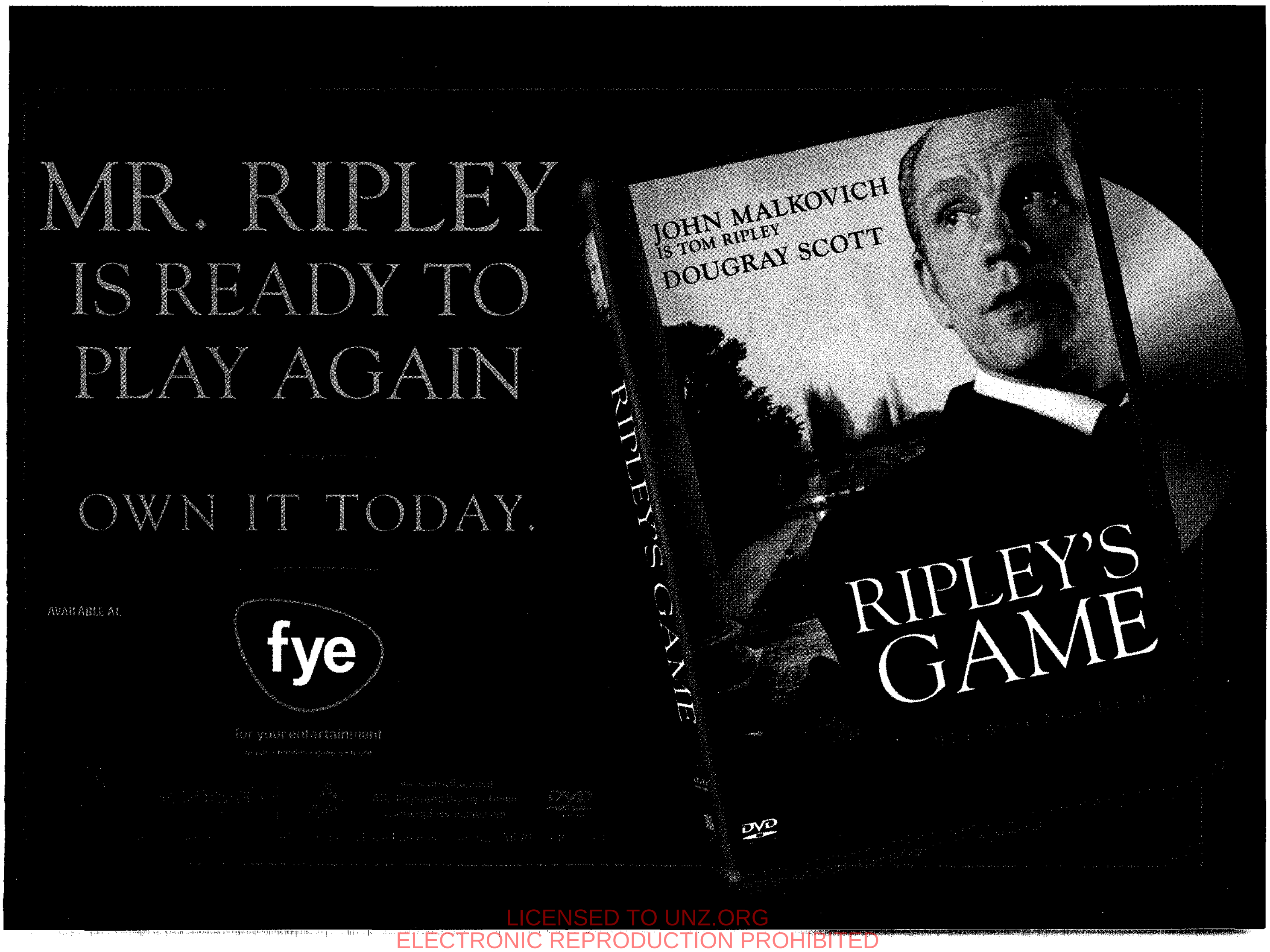
GALLERIES—CHELSEA

BRIAN ALFRED
Photos and digital drawings are the sources for muted paintings of cities, computers, and modernist architecture. Collages that are actually crafted with paper look computer-generated. An animated video with a spare electronic soundtrack serves as a catalogue of Alfred's earlier work—and a demonstration of how the postindustrial landscape can be both gorgeous and depressing. Through April 24. (Protetch, 511 W. 22nd St. 212-633-6999.)

THOMAS DEMAND
Demand builds startlingly realistic tableaux out of construction paper and then photographs them. The results are pristine and Teutonic, in the Gursky-Struth tradition. "Space Simulator" is an epic reconstruction of a Cold War-era astronaut-training capsule. "Kitchen" re-creates a nook in Saddam Hussein's hideaway when he was on the lam. There's also a film, "Recorder," which features a paper facsimile of an eight-track sound reel, moving slowly and set to a remixed sample from an allegedly lost fragment of the Beach Boys' 1966 "Smile" sessions. Through April 17. (303, at 525 W. 22nd St. 212-255-1121.)

JULIA JACQUETTE
Creamily painted grids of all-white details from wedding scenes. In one painting, the torsos of sixteen brides are displayed, each wrapped in tight, pristine brocade; another shows four closeup views of buttercream flowers on cake. The slight differences in the whites—undertones of pink, yellow, or blue; levels of opacity and luminescence—turn this catalogue of possibilities into a serious formal exercise. Through April 3. (Steinberg, 526 W. 26th St. 212-924-5770.)

CHENEY THOMPSON
The gallery walls are covered by dozens of trompe-l'oeil-style paintings—renditions of two-by-fours, rusting corrugated steel, bricks, and particle board. The constructions look like something made from an Ikea kit packaged with the wrong instructions. But themes emerge: the line of one piece of lumber stretches across four or five canvases, a construction has a twin on a neighboring canvas. Large, stuttering, undulating pat-



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THE NAYSAYER

Q: I'm thinking about quitting my Wall Street job to pursue my passion for the great outdoors. What do you recommend?

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Dear Pastures,

I would guess that you have a ton of cash and a cushy life. Why give that up? Try taking a long vacation. Trust me, after a month of roughing it in the outdoors, you're going to miss your fancy loft and German automobile.

And call me when you get back, I need some investment tips.

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The Naysayer

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terns emerge, directed at vanishing points on each wall. The paintings lack a single center, as does the gallery—a bunker blocks access to the middle of the room. Through April 10. (Kreps, 516A W. 20th St. 212-741-8849.)

XIAOZE XIE
Lush, precise paintings of stacks of newspapers. Viewed from the side, and often bound with twine as though prepared for recycling, the stacks reduce the events of each day to slivers of text—"surprise threats . . . specter that the war could . . . quickly spiral"—and scraps of photographs: the bloom of an explosion, the geometry of a car's grille, a hand gripping the stock of a machine gun. The papers all date from late 2001 to early 2003, and the rapidity with which one day's violence was eclipsed by that of the next becomes astonishing rather than numbing. Through April 10. (Cowles, 537 W. 24th St. 212-741-8999.)

"UNCHARTED TERRITORY: SUBJECTIVE MAPPING BY ARTISTS AND CARTOGRAPHERS"
Meditations on the conventions of map-making. Gabriel Orozco's rust-flaked outdoor globe takes on the appearance of a topographical map; Vik Muniz spills sugar over the page of an atlas to make his topographical features; and Kathy Prendergast charts the way from "Love" to "Paradise," with detours through "Mistaken Creek" and "Desolate Branch" in an edited map of the eastern United States. Through April 10. (Saul, 535 W. 22nd St. 212-627-2410.)

Short List

LYNDA BENGLIS
Cheim & Read, 547 W. 25th St. 212-242-7727. Through April 3.

BARBARA KRUGER
Mary Boone, 541 W. 24th St. 212-752-2929. Through April 24.

ROBERT OVERBY
Fredericks Freiser, 504 W. 22nd St. 212-633-6555. Through April 3.

GALLERIES-DOWNTOWN

NICOLE EISENMAN
Eisenman's messy drawing-installations of the mid-nineties, inspired by American political cartoons from the thirties, have given way to finished canvases. And engaging political rant has been ditched for blander ruminations on moving upstate. "Captain Awesome," a bare-chested redneck, stands in a puddle wagging an ear of corn. "4:20" is a sad-sack portrayal of disaffected rural youth. Through April 10. (Koenig, 249 Centre St. 212-334-9255.)

LAURA OWENS
Owens' sources have ranged from Chinese scrolls and screens to English embroidery and Early American quilts. She generally works on a grand scale, but only two large canvases are included here, both untitled and abstruse. One features a horse-drawn coach against a washy nocturnal background filled with stars; the other depicts a vaudevillian dance number. Drawings range in style from a Mannerist St. Sebastian to an American-primitive George and Martha Washington, and there's even an abstract collage made of felt the color of pink bubblegum. Through April 10. (Gavin Brown, 620 Greenwich St. 212-627-5258.)

PHOTOGRAPHY

ZWELETHU MTHETHWA
Magnificent color portraits of South African sugarcane cutters, taken in the fields where they work. The first room in the gallery holds a series of nine prints, six feet by eight feet, and there are smaller pieces in two other rooms. Each picture is of a single figure, often posed at the center of the frame, with stalks of cane lying in rows in the foreground, against a background of erect plants. Nature isn't messy here. It's geometrically formal. In one image, a man stands against what appears to be an impassably dense, green forest of cane. In other pictures, the workers are isolated in an austere, flat landscape. They are all dressed in layers of clothing: ragged skirts, multiple knit caps, two or three soiled cotton shirts tied at the tails, baggy pants, big rubber boots. The effect is remarkably . . . well, chic. The men have a highly evolved sense of fashion, as well as sophisticated ideas about the presentation of self. Through April 17. (Shainman, 513 W. 20th St. 212-645-1701.)

CATHERINE OPIE
Opie's portraits of surfers are restrained, as were her earlier photographs of sexual adventurers. The large pictures of her subjects bobbing in the sea, taken from a distance, capture the determination and absurdity of their quest and are a tender inversion of conventional surfing iconography. In some, the surfers are just black specks in a vast gray waterscape. Through April 10. (Gorney Bravin + Lee, 534 W. 26th St. 212-352-8375.)

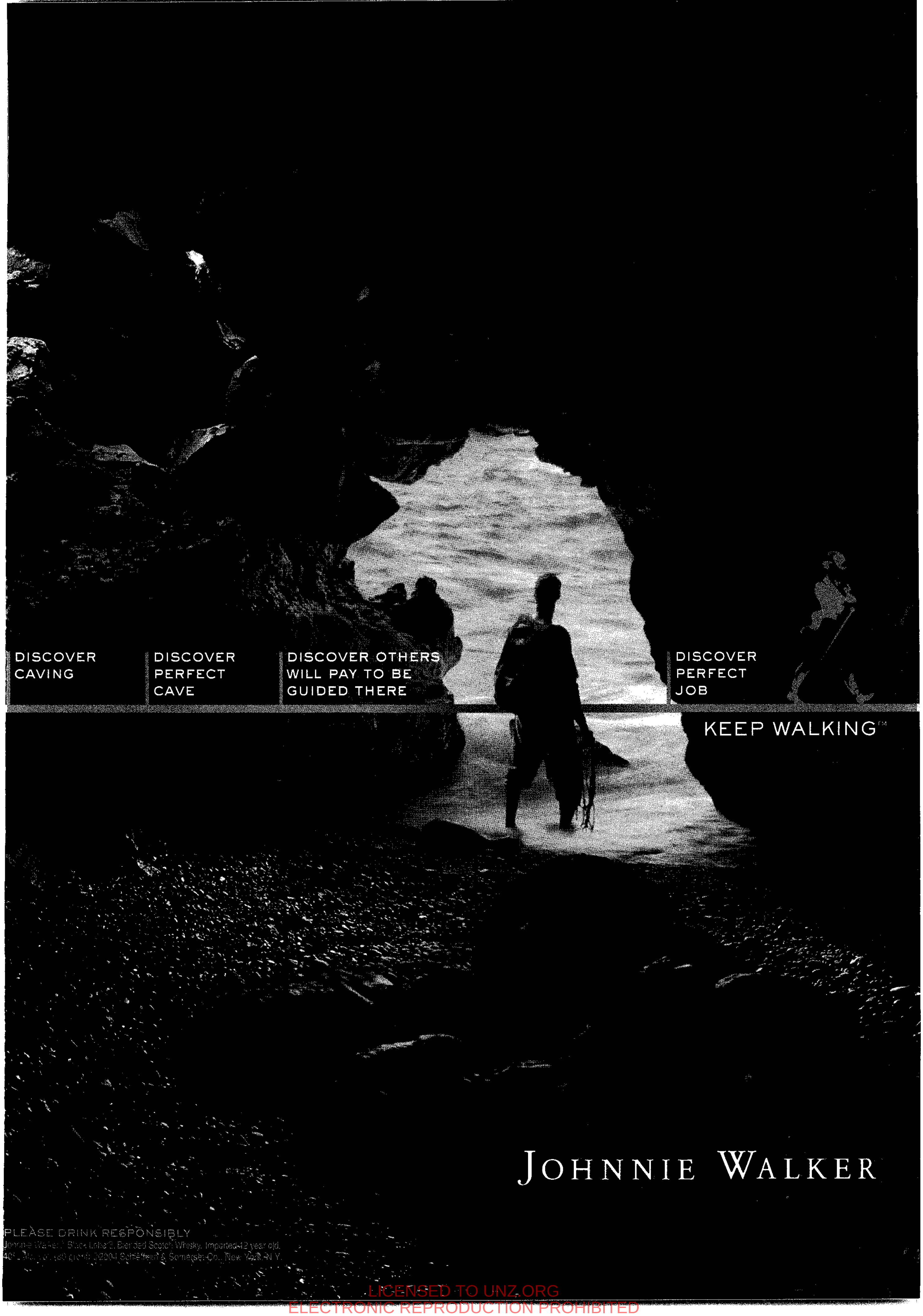
PATTI SMITH
A series of small gelatin silver prints made from Polaroid images of subjects that have talismanic significance for Smith: a china cup that belonged to her father, her friend Robert Mapplethorpe's slippers, a life mask of William Blake, Hermann Hesse's typewriter, William Burroughs's bandanna. Several of the photographs were taken in Sussex, at and near Virginia Woolf's house, including views of the writer's bed and the River Ouse, where she drowned herself. The pictures are quiet and thoughtful, with a religious streak (the shape of a granite cross owned by Mapplethorpe is echoed in the embroidery and folds of Woolf's coverlet). Through April 24. (Robert Miller, 524 W. 26th St. 212-366-4774.)

ALEC SOTH
Soth lugged an eight-by-ten view camera the length of the Mississippi River, from his home in Minnesota to the southernmost part of Louisiana accessible by car, making landscapes, portraits, still-lifes, and photographs of abandoned rooms. Each image has a distinctive, often muted palette. The green of the river's edge in one picture is broken only by white morning glories and an abandoned metal bed frame. The dreary brownish gray of the earth around the house in Dyess, Arkansas, that Johnny Cash grew up in is complemented by an ominous gray sky. Building on the school of photography practiced by Robert Frank, Garry Winogrand, William Eggleston, and Joel Sternfeld, Soth has found a brooding sexuality, an eccentric beauty, and an overwhelming sadness in the people and places along the river. A buff construction worker from Minneapolis sits in his kitchen in his jockey shorts; a mattress floats in the stagnant water at the river's edge in Arkansas; children hang out in an overgrown cemetery in New Orleans. The images are large, as big as fifty inches by forty inches, and elegantly composed. Through April 24. (Milo, 552 W. 24th St. 212-414-0370.)

MASSIMO VITALE
Vitale's large candy-gloss photographs of European vacationers have a slick, faintly bleached appearance, which captures both the unrealness and the lassitude of life on holiday. The pictures are sly: crowded beaches with many neat rows of chairs and umbrellas—and throngs of pale, determined people—appear to enforce torpor as much as they provide the setting for a hard-won idyll. Through April 10. (Benrubi, 52 E. 76th St. 212-517-3766.)

"IRON AND STEEL"
This exhibition of more than sixty vintage prints made in the twenties, thirties, and forties presents a heroic view of machines and industry: Margaret Bourke-White's dark, infernal images of steelmaking, Harold Costain's studies in a salt mine, Todd Webb and Herbert Matter on skyscraper-building. The pictures are crisp, dramatically lit, and resolutely modern. Through April 23. (De Lellis, 47 E. 68th St. 212-327-1482.)

INTERNATIONAL CENTER OF PHOTOGRAPHY
"War in Iraq" begins with a photograph by James Nachtwey of the smoldering ruins of the World Trade Center at night and a number of pictures



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taken in Afghanistan, but the heart of the show is the work from Iraq; though familiar from magazines and newspapers, it gains emotional weight when seen in a larger format. Two American soldiers drag the body of an Iraqi along a road; a bridge leading into Baghdad is taken by American troops, with casualties on both sides; Iraqi soldiers are shot at point-blank range; Shiites in Karbala celebrate their newfound religious freedom through self-flagellation. The brave photographers who bear witness are from the Paris-based photo agency VII, which was formed in September, 2001, just before the terrorist attacks. They include Christopher Anderson, Ron Haviv, Alexandra Boulet, Antonin Kratochvil, and Gary Knight. Through May 30. (1133 Sixth Ave. 212-857-0000.)

Short List

LOTTE JACOBI
Jewish Museum, 1109 Fifth Ave. 212-423-3200. Through April 11.

ANDREA MODICA
Houk, 745 Fifth Ave. 212-750-7070. Through April 17.

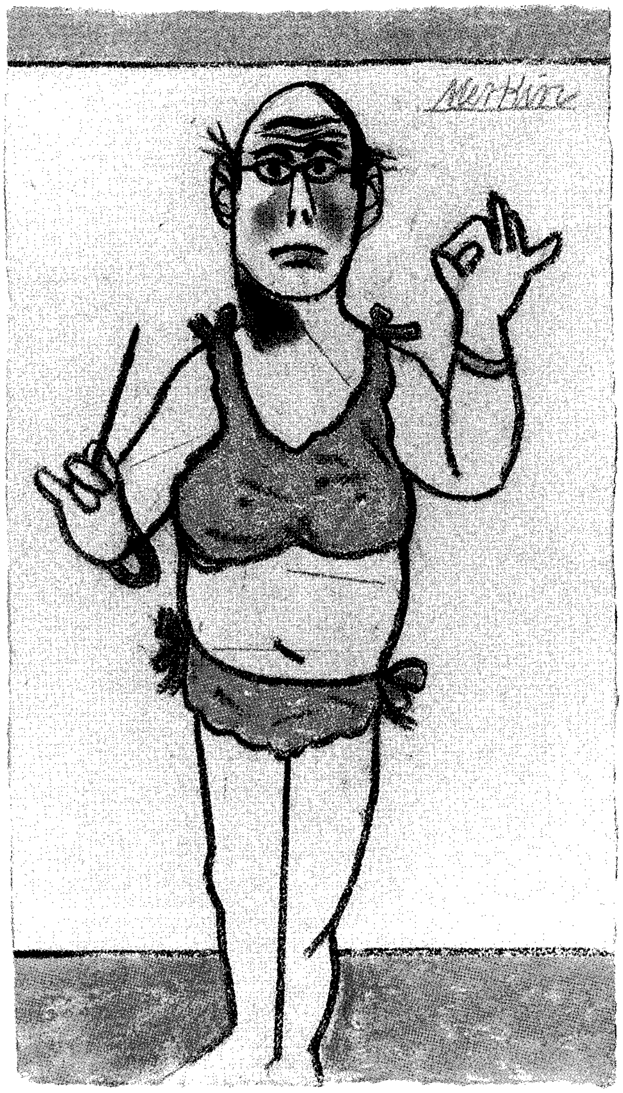
AUCTIONS AND ANTIQUES

SOTHEBY'S

March 31 at 10 A.M.: "Arcade" furniture and decorative art works, a selection of items offered at moderate prices. ♦ March 31 at 2: A similar auction of American paintings. ♦ April 2 at 10:15 A.M.: The breathtaking artistry of Oriental carpets unfurls across this wide-ranging sale, which features rugs from western Anatolia, China, and the territories between them. The styles are varied and spectacular: designs from the mountainous Caucasus region, for example, are bold and geometric, with ziggurat-shaped color fields that are folded, flipped, and rearranged across woven backgrounds of vermillion and midnight blue. A fin-de-siècle Kashan carpet, from central Persia, is a riot of florid detail, while a rug from colonial India portrays angels guarding the perimeter of a supernatural garden. ♦ April 5 at 10:15 A.M. and April 6 at 10:15 A.M. and 2: In this auction of watches and automatons, papier-mâché figurines of clowns, chefs, and "blackamoor" musicians hide their inner workings as they play instruments, bang on pans, and even smoke hookahs, while skeleton clocks from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, designed to expose their gears, unveil the intricate mechanics of measuring time. The second and third sessions each conclude with an offering of powerhouse wristwatches (such as a well-preserved gold perpetual-calendar watch from 1951 by Patek Philippe, expected to bring up to three hundred and fifty thousand dollars). (York Ave. at 72nd St. 212-606-7000.)

CHRISTIE'S

March 30 at 10 A.M. and March 31 at 10 A.M. and 2: The "House Sale," an occasional offering of moderately priced furniture, art works, and decorative objects. (20 Rockefeller Plaza, at 49th St. 212-636-2000.)



Leon Botstein conducts the American Symphony Orchestra in "Victorian Secrets" at Avery Fisher Hall on April 2.

CLASSICAL MUSIC

OPERA

METROPOLITAN OPERA

Karita Mattila—giving the performance of her life—sings the title role in Jürgen Flimm's stunning new production of **"Salome."** Larissa Diadkova, Siegfried Jerusalem, Bryn Terfel, and Matthew Polenzani are her excellent colleagues; Valery Gergiev conducts. (March 31 and April 3 at 8.) ♦ **"Rigoletto,"** with Olga Makarina, Irina Mishura, Ramón Vargas, and Frederick Burchinal; Marco Armiliato. (April 1 at 8.) ♦ With Ruth Ann Swenson and Franz Grundheber replacing Makarina and Burchinal. (April 6 at 8.) ♦ Julius Rudel conducts a revival of **"Madama Butterfly,"** featuring Liping Zhang, Maria Zifchak, Richard Leech, and Dwayne Croft. (April 2 at 8.) ♦ Otto Schenk's production of Wagner's "Der Ring des Nibelungen," which has three cycles of performances this spring, continues with **"Die Walküre,"** featuring Jane Eaglen, Deborah Voigt, Yvonne Naef, Plácido Domingo, James Morris, and Sergei Koptchak; James Levine. (April 3 at 12:30.) ♦ When Elijah Moshinsky's production of **"Nabucco,"** Verdi's early, rough-hewn jewel of an opera, had its triumphant première, in 2001, Maria Guleghina took on the punishing role of Abigaille. More recently the young American soprano Andrea Gruber has proved her mettle in the part, which requires both rippling fiorituras and real dramatic weight. Gruber is again leading the cast, which also features Marina Domashenko, Gwyn Hughes Jones, Leo Nucci, and Samuel Ramey, a veteran of the original run; Carlo Rizzi. (April 5 at 8.) (Metropolitan Opera House. 212-362-6000.)

NEW YORK CITY OPERA

"Le Nozze di Figaro," with Christine Brandes, Pamela Armstrong, Rinat Shaham, Kyle Ketelsen, and Brett Polegato; Steven Mosteller conducts. (March 31 at 7:30, April 2 at 8, and April 4 at 1:30.) ♦ The Great American Opera it's not, but Marvin David Levy's **"Mourning Becomes Electra"**—a neo-Romantic casualty of the nineteen-sixties style wars, which City Opera presents in its "revised final version"—at least performs the valuable task of reducing Eugene O'Neill's sprawling Civil War trilogy to its fervid emotional core. Which gives the cast's reigning sopranos, the fiery Lauren Flanigan and the darkly elegant Emily Pulley, plenty of room to maneuver. Also featuring Jason Howard, Stephen West, and Kurt Ollmann as the House of Mannon's hapless men; George Manahan's firm conducting gives Levy's histrionic score all the advocacy it could possibly deserve. (April 1 at 7:30.) ♦ The company's acclaimed production of Handel's **"Xerxes"** returns with a cast headed by Sarah Connolly (in the title role), Amy Burton, and David Walker; Gary Thor Wedow. (April 3 at 1:30.) ♦ Mark Lamos's production of **"Tosca,"** set in Fascist Italy in the nineteen-thirties, returns with a cast headed by Michele Capalbo, Carlo Ventre, and Grant Youngblood; Joseph Rescigno. (April 3 at 8.) (New York State Theatre. 212-870-5570.)

COLLEGIATE CHORALE: "UN BALLO IN MASCHERA"

The conductor Robert Bass goes where even the Met fears to tread—performing Verdi's melodrama of betrayal and assassination with its original libretto, set in the Swedish court of King Gustav III. The distinguished musicologist Philip Gossett has devised a new edition of the work for the occasion, fitting the text to the music of Verdi's final version of the score (which, due to censorship, was set in Colonial Boston, of all places), with only minor changes in the vocal lines. Bass conducts a concert performance with the Orchestra of St. Luke's and an impressive cast: Salvatore Licitra, Dmitri Hvorostovsky, Michèle Crider, Harolyn Blackwell, and Ewa Podleś. (Carnegie Hall. 212-247-7800. March 31 at 8.)

ORCHESTRAS AND CHORUSES

NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC

The violinist Julian Rachlin, a protégé of the orchestra's music director, Lorin Maazel, makes his Philharmonic début with an unusual choice: Penderecki's Violin Concerto No. 2 ("Metamorphosen"), a recent work with a glamorous provenance (it was commissioned and premièred by Anne-Sophie Mutter). Maazel concludes the program with Schubert's Symphony No. 9 in C Major, "The Great." (Avery Fisher Hall. 212-875-5656. April 1 at 7:30, April 2 at 2, and April 3 at 8.)

SEATTLE SYMPHONY

Gerard Schwarz abandoned his New York gigs some time ago, but he has remained steadfast to his superb Seattle ensemble, a group with which he has made dozens of recordings. Contemporary American music has always been one of Schwarz's great causes, and the orchestra's centennial visit to Carnegie Hall features the New York première of Bright Sheng's "The Phoenix" (a setting of Hans Christian Andersen, with the soprano Jane Eaglen) as well as music by Strauss and Sibelius (the Second Symphony). (212-247-7800. April 1 at 8.)

AMERICAN SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA: "VICTORIAN SECRETS"

Leon Botstein's coyly titled concert offers some out-of-the-way works by four allegedly underrated Brits—Arthur Sullivan, Frank Bridge, Edward Elgar (the touching "Sea Pictures," a favorite of Janet Baker's, sung here by Susan Platts), and Charles Villiers Stanford (the grandiose "Irish Symphony"). (Avery Fisher Hall. 212-721-6500. April 2 at 8.)

NEW YORK COLLEGIUM

The early-music orchestra, at its best when its music director, Andrew Parrott, is in town, offers

RICHARD MERKIN

a hypothetical reënactment of a famous funeral concert: that of Prince Leopold of Cöthen, Bach's favorite patron, in 1729. To match the surviving texts, Parrott has adapted music from the St. Matthew Passion and "Trauer Ode," works from which, scholars maintain, Bach poached music for the event. The vocal soloists include the soprano Emily Van Evera and the tenor Marc Molomot. (Ethical Culture Society Concert Hall, 2 W. 64th St. 212-717-9246. April 2 at 8.)

RECITALS

LEON FLEISHER WORKSHOP CONCERT
Four promising young musicians under the tutelage of the eminent American pianist offer an evening of late Schubert piano sonatas. (Weill Recital Hall, Carnegie Hall. 212-247-7800. March 31 at 7:30.)

"DAWN UPSHAW: FOLK SONGS"
Upshaw's "Perspectives" concerts at Carnegie Hall are a showcase for this wonderful American soprano's omnivorous musical instincts. The series begins with a program combining the world première of Osvaldo Golijov's "Ayre" with the work on which it was modelled: Luciano Berio's "Folk Songs," composed in 1964 for another adventurous diva, Cathy Berberian. Upshaw's accompanying musicians include the flutist Susan Palma and the sound designer Jeremy Flower. (Zankel Hall. 212-247-7800. March 31 at 7:30.)

BARGEMUSIC
April 1-2 at 7:30: The pianist Vladimir Stoupel performs music by Schubert (including the "Wanderer Fantasy"), Scriabin, and Ravel ("La Valse"). ♦ April 3 at 7:30 and April 4 at 4: The violinist Anna Rabinova and the cellist Daire Fitzgerald join Stoupel for a concert of works by Weber, Schumann, and Benjamin Lees ("Silent Voices," a piano trio from 1998). (Fulton Ferry Landing, Brooklyn. 718-624-2083.)

COOPER UNION: PIANO MEGA CONCERT
New York's finest new-music pianists—including Marilyn Nonken, Alan Feinberg, Stephen Gosling, and Marc Ponthus—perform works by such modern masters as William Bolcom, Lee Hyla, Simon Holt, György Ligeti, and Salvatore Sciarrino. (Great Hall, Third Ave. at 7th St. April 1 at 7:30. Tickets at the door.)

JESSICA BRUSER: "FANTASIES"
The young Canadian pianist offers a program of unfettered works by Chopin, Bach, Scriabin, Mozart (the Fantasy in C Minor), and Steven Burke ("Night Fantasy," a world première). (Weill Recital Hall, Carnegie Hall. 212-247-7800. April 1 at 8.)

NEW JUILLIARD ENSEMBLE
Four premières—including works by the inventive jazz-based composers Guus Janssen, from Holland, and Rolf Wallin, from Norway—grace Joel Sachs's latest concert with his invaluable student ensemble. (Alice Tully Hall. April 1 at 8. For free tickets, which are required, call 212-769-7406.)

"INTERPRETATIONS" SERIES: THOMAS BUCKNER
The veteran downtown baritone joins some fellow avant-garders (including the violinist Conrad Harris and the pianist "Blue" Gene Tyranny) for new works by David Darling, Wadada Leo Smith, and Tyranny, along with an improvisation with the pianist Borah Bergman. (Merkin Concert Hall, 129 W. 67th St. 212-501-3330. April 1 at 8.)

"NEW SOUND, NEW YORK"
In the opening event of a new monthlong festival, organized by the Kitchen and Cooper Union's Chanin School of Architecture, three architects (Victoria Meyers, Christopher Warnick, and Stéphan Roux) will be paired with three trios of experimental musicians to create "three-dimensional sound structures" with a computer-based matrix designed by one of the concert's curators, Michael J. Schumacher. (The Kitchen, 512 W. 19th St. 212-255-5793. April 1 at 8. For a full schedule of events, see www.timeoutny.com/nsny.)

"THE ASSADS: MUSIC OF BRAZIL"
Three generations of the guitar-wielding family sing and play folk and concert music of their native country in an evening at the Temple of Dendur. (Metropolitan Museum, Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. 212-570-3949. April 3 at 8.)

MILLER THEATRE: BENEDICT MASON
England, unlike Germany and France, has always had a certain tolerance for musical eccentrics; one of the finest living examples is Mason, a filmmaker who turned to composition in his early thirties. Since then his music, plainly titled but restlessly mercurial and imaginative, has earned world notice, something George Steel's series acknowledges with a "Composer Portrait" concert that includes the première of "AWS/Miller: The Fifth Music," a work written for the dynamic young ensemble Alarm Will Sound. (Columbia University, Broadway at 116th St. 212-854-7799. April 3 at 8.)

MUSIC AT THE 92ND STREET Y
April 3 at 8: The Orion String Quartet, as pure and unaffected a group of instrumental conversationalists as you could find, performs music by Haydn, Bartók (the Quartet No. 4), and Marc Neikrug (the New York première of his Piano Quintet, with the composer at the keyboard). ♦ April 4 at 3: Musicians from the New York Philharmonic join with the pianist Hélène Grimaud for music by Schumann (the Piano Quintet and the Violin Sonata in A Minor) and Brahms. (Lexington Ave. at 92nd St. 212-415-5500.)

ANDREAS SCHOLL
Like the mezzo-soprano Cecilia Bartoli, this countertenor is devoting more and more of his thrilling vocal resources to buried treasures from the Baroque and Classical eras. His latest concert features music by such seventeenth-century masters as Nauwach, Albert, Krieger, and Görner, with some Handel to boot. (Alice Tully Hall. 212-721-6500. April 4 at 2.)

ENSEMBLE MASQUES
The Montreal-based early-music band makes its New York début with a concert of instrumental music by Bach, Biber, Pachelbel, and others. (Frick Collection, 1 E. 70th St. 212-288-0700. April 4 at 5.)

ABOVE AND BEYOND

READINGS
March 31 at 6: The Scots Jen Hadfield and Linda Henderson read from their poetry and fiction. (Mid-Manhattan Library, Fifth Ave. at 40th St. No tickets necessary.) ♦ March 31 at 7: Kurt Vonnegut, Susan Sontag, Russell Banks, and others read from works by exiled or persecuted authors. (New School, 66 W. 12th St. 212-229-5488.) ♦ April 1 at 7: E. L. Doctorow offers selections from his forthcoming novel, "Sweet Land Stories." (Lipton Hall, New York University, 108 W. 3rd St. 212-998-8816.) ♦ April 6 at 6:30: "Poetry & the Creative Mind" (see This Week). (Alice Tully Hall, Lincoln Center. 212-721-6500.)

TALKS
March 31 at 7: Lewis H. Lapham, the editor of *Harper's*, Barry W. Lynn, the executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, Susan Jacoby, the author of "Free Thinkers: A History of American Secularism," and others participate in a forum called "The Unholy Alliance Between Religion and Politics." (The New York Society for Ethical Culture, 2 W. 64th St. 212-874-5210.) ♦ April 1 at 5:45: The Polk Award-winning journalists Nancy Cleeland and Charles Lewis join the editor Christopher Power for a talk about muckraking today. (HBO Theatre, Sixth Ave. at 42nd St. For more information, call 212-686-5005.) ♦ April 3 at 10 A.M.: The actress Janeane Garofalo gives the keynote address for "Power & Representation in a Media-Saturated Age," the twenty-ninth annual Scholar & Feminist Conference. Four panel discussions are scheduled, and the participants include the *Nation* columnist Katha Pollitt, the film producer Christine Vachon ("Boys Don't Cry"), and Debbie Stoller, the editor of *Bust* magazine. (Barnard Hall, Barnard College, Broadway at 117th St. For more information, call 212-854-2067.)

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MOVIES OPENING

HELLBOY
Guillermo del Toro directed this action film adapted from the comic book about a demon (Ron Perlman) who helps fight paranormal evil forces. With Selma Blair, John Hurt, Doug Jones, and Rupert Evans. Opening April 2.

HOME ON THE RANGE
An animated film from Disney in which three cows try to save their dairy farm. The voice cast includes Roseanne, Judi Dench, and Jennifer Tilly. Opening April 2.

MARATHON
A Manhattan woman (Sara Paul) attempts to complete seventy-seven crossword puzzles in one day as she travels on subways and buses around the city, in an experimental drama directed by Amir Naderi. Opening April 2. (Quad Cinema.)

THE MIDDLE OF THE WORLD
Vicente Amorim's directorial début is the story of a family of six who bicycle from a poor area in northeastern Brazil all the way to Rio de Janeiro. In Portuguese. Opening April 2.

THE OUTSKIRTS
Petr Lutsik directed this black comedy about a group of collectivist farmers in Russia who decide to strike back when the government takes their land. In Russian. Opening April 2. (Anthology Film Archives.)

THE PRINCE AND ME
In a romantic comedy directed by Martha Coolidge, a pre-med major (Julia Stiles) falls in love with a fellow-student (Luke Mably) who turns out to be Danish royalty. Opening April 2.

RED PERSIMMONS
A documentary in which the harvesting of persimmons is presented as a window onto the traditional culture of rural Japan. Directed by Shinsuke Ogawa and Xiaolian Peng. In Japanese. Opening March 31. (Film Forum.)

SHAOLIN SOCCER
Stephen Chow wrote and directed this comedy, in which he plays a martial-arts monk who reunites with his brothers to compete in a soccer tournament. In Cantonese. Opening April 2.

SON FRÈRE
An adaptation of the novel by Philippe Besson about a gay man caring for his disapproving terminally ill brother. Patrice Chéreau directed. Opening April 2. (Quad Cinema.)

SPRING, SUMMER, FALL, WINTER . . . AND SPRING
Kim Ki-duk wrote and directed this drama, in which he plays a monk enduring training and temptation at a Buddhist monastery. In Korean. Opening April 2. (Angelika Film Center and Lincoln Plaza Cinemas.)

THE UNITED STATES OF LELAND
A famous author's son (Ryan Gosling) commits murder, and an aspiring writer (Don Cheadle) tries to figure out why, in a drama written and directed by Matthew Ryan Hoge. With Kevin Spacey, Chris Klein, and Jena Malone. Opening April 2. (Lincoln Square and Village Theatre VII.)

WALKING TALL
The Rock plays a retired Special Forces soldier who becomes the sheriff of his troubled home town, in a loose remake of the 1973 action film. With Johnny Knoxville and Ashley Scott. Directed by Kevin Bray. Opening April 2.

FILM NOTES

SOUND
SCENE
TAKE
1
2
3
PROD
Etc...

BON VOYAGE
An entertaining and frivolous farce mounted on a pedestal of period realism. In Bordeaux in 1940, the remnants of the French government and the Parisian haut monde mill about in the lobby of the deluxe Hotel Splendide. From the start, the movie is a frenzied fashion show of elegant black Citroëns, rakishly conservative double-breasted suits, and plush silk coverlets. The starlet Viviane (Isabelle Adjani) is the hub of the wheel, a femme fatale whose eyelashes brush the vanity of three men haplessly in love with her: the sappy hero, Frédéric (Grégori Derangère), a carefree young writer who has been Viviane's backstairs lover for years; the suave government minister Beaufort (Gérard Depardieu), who can hardly wait to collaborate with the Germans; and Winckler (Peter Coyote), an English journalist who is also a German spy. The movie reminds one of "Casablanca" and other glamorous Hollywood wartime melodramas in which political intrigue flows through love affairs and black-market deals, and everyone rushing about is connected to everyone else. The expert cast knows how to play farce—exaggerate everything, but not too much.—*David Denby* (Reviewed in our issue of 3/29/04.) (Paris.)

DAWN OF THE DEAD
Some may have forgotten, and others may never have experienced, the hilarious shocks that George Romero, Sam Raimi, and their fellow horror-meisters offered audiences a decade or two ago. The audacity of films like "Evil Dead 2" and the original "Dawn of the Dead" surprised audiences with surreal images of graphic, unnatural violence. In this remake of Romero's zombiefest, the director Zack Snyder brings back the cringe-inducing gore of yore as his flesh-eating zombies attack a Wisconsin mall in search of fresh meat (Sarah Polley and Ving Rhames among a cast of tasty others). The story hacks away most of the original film's satirical subtext of a consumer society gone wild, but it has retained much of the suspenseful action sequences and the fabulously disgusting makeup effects. The movie may be as mindless as a swarm of the undead, but it's fun in its splatter-filled way.—*Bruce Diones* (Battery Park 11, Chelsea Cinemas, 84th Street Sixplex, Empire 25, First & 62nd Cinemas, Kips Bay Theatre, Orpheum VII, 34th Street Theatre, and Union Square.)

DISTANT
An award-winning, pulse-slowing picture from the Turkish writer and director Nuri Bilge Ceylan. It is the tale of two relatives, Yusuf (Mehmet Emin Toprak) and Mahmut (Muzaffer Özdemir); the former hitches a ride from the provinces to Istanbul, where he lodges with the latter and tries to find employment. It must be said that his powers of initiative, in this respect, are not great, and if he spent half as much time filling out job applications as he does wandering the city under feathery falls of snow, he would be earning serious money. The movie, however, profits from his strollings, for what intrigues Ceylan is not success, or good companionship, but the chilly drift of melancholia. The two men never click, and even the cosmopolitan Mahmut finds less comfort in his love life than in his secret stash of porn. Nobody will come out of this movie singing—you are more likely to emerge with a scowl, or with the need for a cigarette—but the sheer cussedness of the project has a grace and conviction of its own. In Turkish.—*Anthony Lane* (3/15/04) (Cinema Village.)

DOGVILLE
Pedantic, obtuse, and unwatchable, this three-hour exercise in inept avant-gardism, written and directed by Lars Von Trier, is set in a town without walls, streets, or air—a conceptual Depression-era nowheresville in the American Rockies in which obvious allegories of conformity and viciousness are acted out by a cast reciting an inhuman language into the dead silence. We might be present at a nightmarish school play. With Nicole Kidman as the poor waif who eventually takes her revenge, Paul Bettany as a weak-willed artist, and a variety of other excellent actors submitting to Von Trier's solemnly stupid rituals of betrayal. The pompous narrator is John Hurt, who sounds like Henry Fielding wishing he had a tankard in his hand.—*D.D.* (3/29/04) (Angelika Film Center, Lincoln Plaza Cinemas, and 19th Street East 6.)

ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND
Yes, it's another attempt by the screenwriter Charlie Kaufman to replace the antique notion of cinema as persuasive entertainment with that of cinema as some strange, whirring device for the disorientation of the human brain. Jim Carrey plays Joel and Kate Winslet plays Clementine, who fall in love and out of love and back in love again. Fair enough, but Kaufman and the director, Michel Gondry, run the whole story in rewind, as if to prove the Shakespearean theorem that journeys end in lovers' meeting. Just to complicate the issue, Tom Wilkinson plays a dodgy doctor who can, for a fee, wipe the memory of a chosen individual, adored or otherwise, from your mind—a treatment of which both Joel and Clementine avail themselves. The conceit writhes with implausibility, yet it also gives off flashes of high-tech, low-down beauty, as scenes of tenderness begin to go grievously blank before the sweethearts' eyes. Carrey's latest effort to elude, or at least refine, his looney persona is more sincere than convincing, and it is left to Winslet, at once fierce and footloose, to carry the show. On the eighth viewing, say, the damn thing might even make sense. With Mark Ruffalo, Elijah Wood, and a blissed-out Kirsten Dunst—what is she on?—*A.L.* (3/22/04) (BAM Rose Cinemas, Battery Park 11, Chelsea Cinemas, Empire 25, Kips Bay Theatre, Lincoln Square, Orpheum VII, 72nd Street East, 34th Street Theatre, and Union Square.)

GOOD BYE, LENIN!
Christiane (Katrin Sass), a saintly East German Communist, falls into a coma just before the Berlin Wall comes down, in 1989. When she awakens, her son, Alex (Daniel Brühl), creates a kind of ersatz reality for her—a living museum of Communism—in which nothing has changed. He gets his cranky sister and a group of embarrassed neighbors to take part in the charade, going so far as to work with a filmmaker buddy on fake news broadcasts about the unending triumphs of a regime that no longer exists. This social satire was directed by Wolfgang Becker, whose background is in TV, and the movie often plays like a series of television-comedy skits, some of them funny and incisive, some larkish and insubstantial. Yet beneath the slapstick surface lies a sombre German heart: the point of the fable is that Communism in Germany was always an ersatz reality—that for forty years Party leaders were creating a large-scale version of the fiction that Alex creates in his mother's bedroom. In German.—*D.D.* (3/8/04) (Angelika Film Center and Lincoln Plaza Cinemas.)

THE IMMORTAL STORY
In Orson Welles's last completed narrative film, his 1968 adaptation of Isak Dinesen's "An Immortal Story" (from her "Anecdotes of Destiny"), the director stars as a millionaire tea trader in Macao who, in a final outbreak of hubris and erotic curiosity, makes a hoary sea tale come true: the one about a rich old man who hires a sailor to make love to his young wife. Roger Coggio plays the saturnine employee who arranges this sad "comedy," with Jeanne Moreau as the make-believe spouse (actually, a fellow-clerk's mistress) and Norman Eshley as the seafarer in need of five guineas. Thanks to the evocative color, Erik Satie's music on the soundtrack, and Moreau's slashing, passionate presence, there's something haunting about the tycoon's attempt to turn fiction into fact, but even at fifty-eight minutes, the movie feels attenuated; it lacks Welles's usual bursts of poetic compression. Eshley sets off no sexual current with Moreau, and the lyricism is strictly secondhand: during their lovemaking she wonders whether an earthquake has hit Macao.—*Michael Sragow* (Film Forum; April 2-5.)

INTERMISSION
Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. (First & 62nd Cinemas, Lincoln Square, and Village Theatre VII.)

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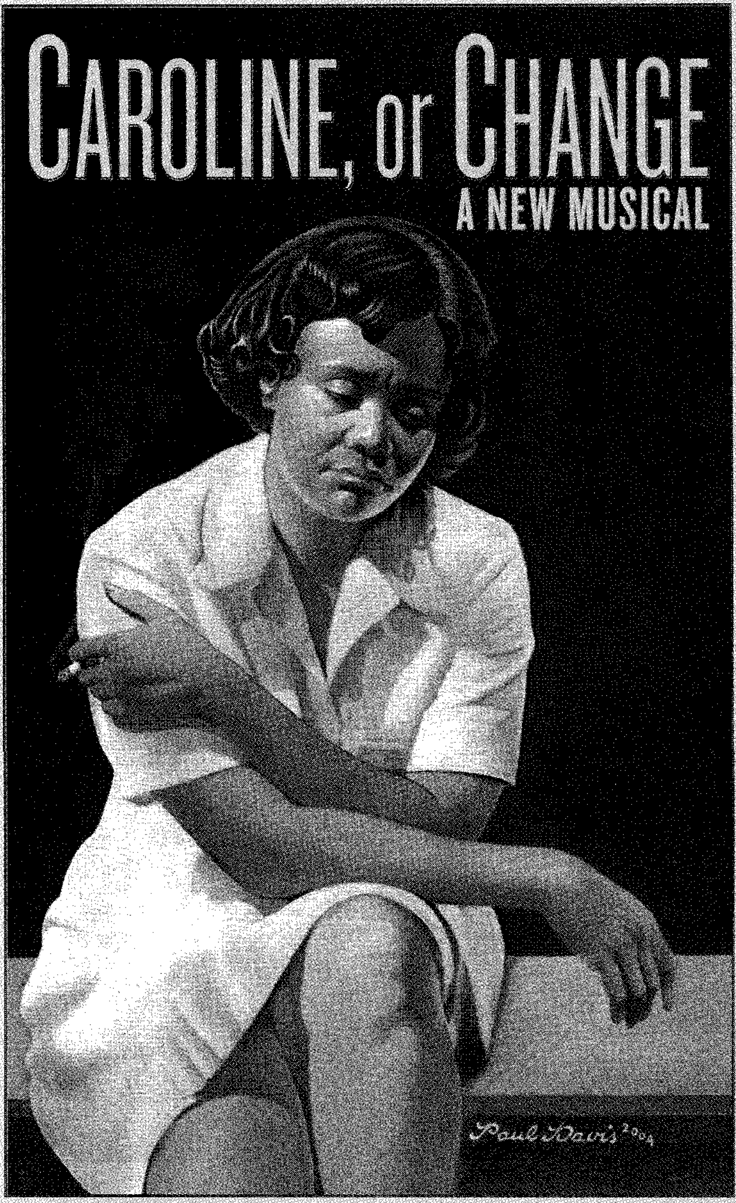
FRANK RICH, THE NEW YORK TIMES



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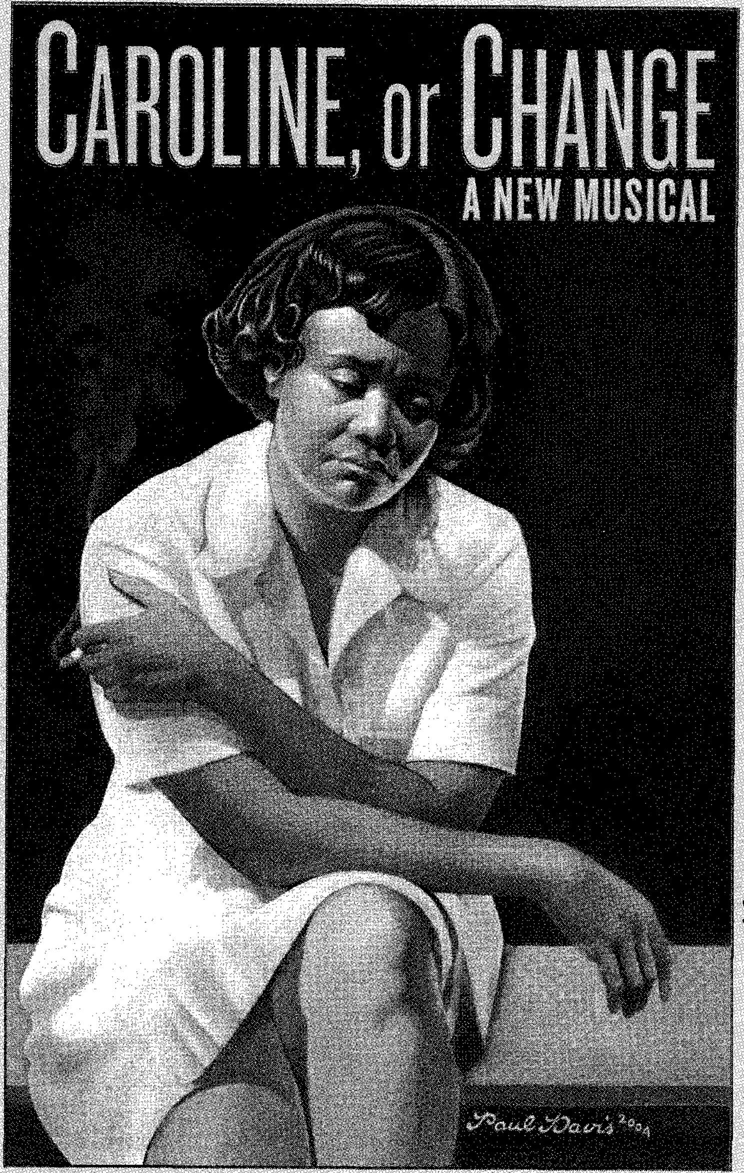

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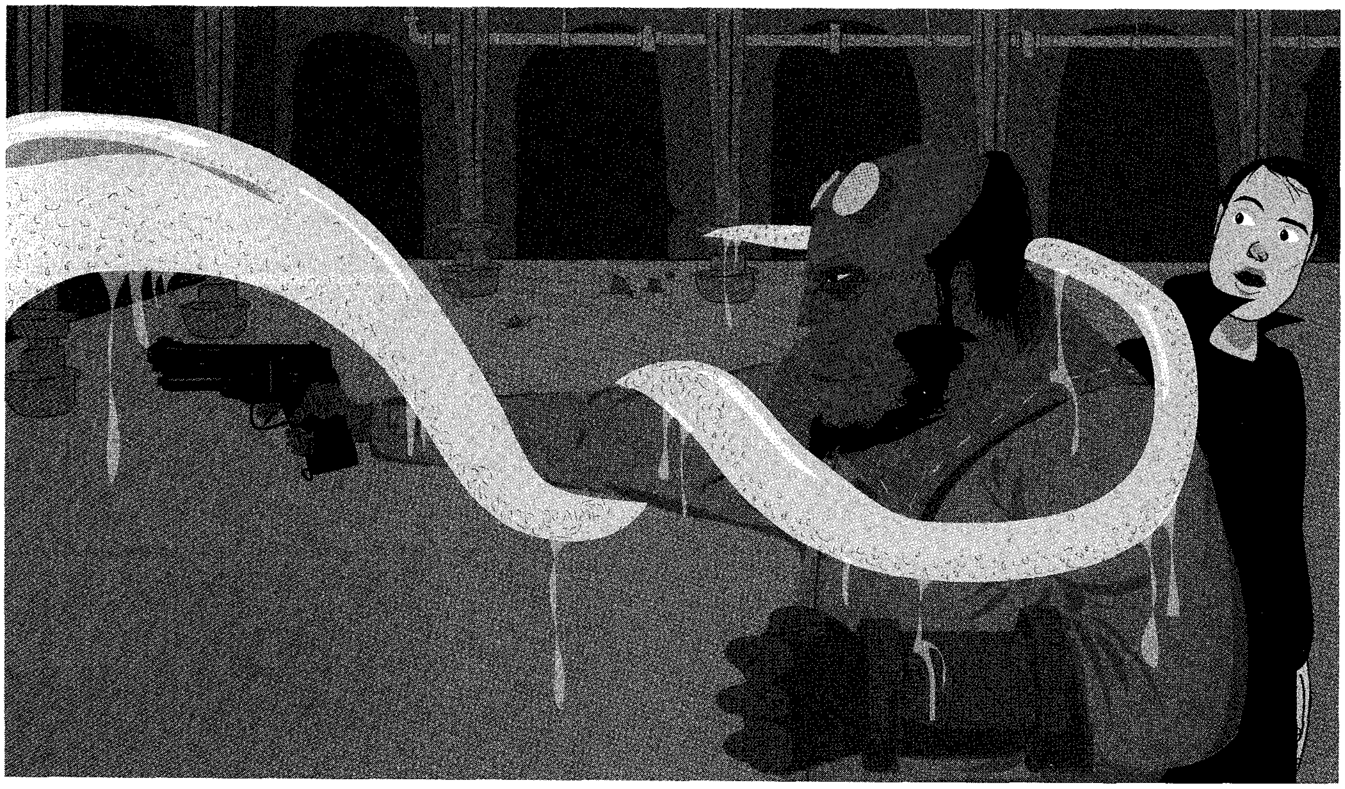
THE LADYKILLERS
Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. (Battery Park 16, Chelsea Cinemas, Empire 25, Kips Bay Theatre, Lincoln Square, Metro Twin, Orpheum VII, 34th Street Theatre, and Village East Cinemas.)

LUMUMBA
Raoul Peck tells the story of the African freedom fighter Patrice Lumumba with fire and grace. The opening scene sets the vérité tone with the sound of a saw cutting through bone; two Belgian soldiers are breaking down Lumumba's body and incinerating it in a ten-gallon drum. From there, the film backtracks to the origins of the Congolese independence movement and proceeds to explain how a man's legacy could be considered so threatening. Peck handles all of this, including the atrocities, with refinement, and lets the drama of Lumumba's story run smoothly, free of heavy historical detail. Eriq Ebouaney is extraordinary in the lead role, the production feels emotionally true, and the speeches generate spontaneous applause. Only the ending comes off as too hopeful, as we know that with Lumumba's death, the regime of Mobutu began. Originally released in 2000. In French and Lingala.—*Michael Agger* (Moving Image; April 3-4.)

MACBETH
Orson Welles shot this reckless production in twenty-three days at Republic Studios (best known for its cowboy quickies), and the movie casts a hallucinatory spell even when the action goes flat and the players declaim in Scottish burrs. Opening with a swirl of phantasmagoric effects, the picture seems to emerge from the cauldron of the three prophetic witches. The producer-director-adapter-star gallops onscreen in Oriental headgear, cape, and armor, and then, after this garish entrance, proceeds to give one of his best classical performances. His characterization of the murderous chieftain has ruminative weight—he stresses the ambiguous aside "If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me / Without my stir." Although Welles emphasizes the contest between paganism and Western religion (especially with his barbaric, Druidical visual design), the movie also pays attention to traditional Shakespearean concerns like hubris and free will. With Jeanette Nolan, Dan O'Herlihy, and Roddy McDowall. Originally released in 1948.—*M.S.* (Film Forum; April 5.)


Opening April 2, "Hellboy," Guillermo del Toro's adaptation of a comic-book series about a crime-fighting demon.

MAXIMILIAN BODE

THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST
Mel Gibson's bloody re-creation of the last twelve hours in the life of Jesus is one of the cruellest movies in the history of the cinema. Gibson and the screenwriter Benedict Fitzgerald selected and enhanced incidents from the four Gospels and collated them into a single, surpassingly violent narrative in which the incomparable glories of Jesus' temperament—the joyousness, the brilliance, the eloquence—are all but effaced by the spectacle of his physical destruction. The lashing and flaying, often in slow-motion, go on forever, and Gibson displays a curious technical fascination with the details of crucifixion—huge nails being hammered into hands and feet, with James Caviezel's Jesus howling at each blow. Here and there, the movie has a kind of grim power, and Caleb Deschanel's even gray lighting at the Crucifixion is stunning, but this is a sickening, unilluminating, and ignorant show. The filmmakers have also changed in small ways a number of things from the Gospels and ignored what historians know of ancient Judea, all with the result of making the Jewish leaders more, and the Roman leaders less, responsible for the death of Jesus. It's a deeply angry film, and one wonders how believers can react to it with anything but guilt, fear, or loathing.—*D.D.* (3/1/04) (Battery Park 11, Chelsea West, East 86th Street Cinemas, 84th Street Sixplex, Empire 25, Kips Bay Theatre, 64th and 2nd, 34th Street Theatre, and Union Square.)

THE RETURN
This first feature by Andrei Zvyagintsev has the startling, irrepressible quality of the best débuts. A pair of brothers, young Ivan (Ivan Dobronravov) and the teen-age Andrey (Vladimir Garin), live peacefully in a fatherless household in a brackish backwater of what used to be the Soviet Union. In the midst of an idle summer, their father (Konstantin Lavronenko) turns up from nowhere and starts, with minimum benevolence, to reëstablish his authority. Andrey responds well to such tyranny, while Ivan, a mother's boy, glowers at the treacherous interloper. Most of the film takes place on a fishing trip, which ripples with threat and thrill alike; we know that it cannot end well for father and sons, but we hardly dare to wonder what form the calamity will take. Zvyagintsev gets formidable concentration from his youthful actors, and his storytelling moves with the simplicity—calm, chiselled, and suggestive—of a fable. In Russian.—*A.L.* (3/15/04) (Cinema Village.)

SPARTAN
Mamet in zero gravity. Scene by scene, the writer-director's new movie plays with a spitting intensity, but nothing anyone does has the natural movement of life. The characters seem propelled by the logic of film noir: save the girl, avenge the partner, don't turn on the lights. Val Kilmer plays a military specialist investigating the disappearance of a government official's daughter. The official is probably the President, although the movie is coy about that fact, thereby avoiding any real-world political fallout. Kilmer, who, at times, looks very "Iceman," has the most fun with Mamet's machine-gun dialogue. Along with his protégé (Derek Luke), he uncovers a non-P.C. blond-girl smuggling ring run by Arabs. A few double crosses later, the movie presents the cynical premise that a politician would sacrifice his daughter's life to preserve his chances for reëlection. Even the Grassy Knoll crowd will have trouble swallowing that one.—*M.A.* (Empire 25, Lincoln Square, 19th Street East 6, 64th and 2nd, and Village Theatre VII.)

STARSKY & HUTCH
The comedic teammates Owen Wilson and Ben Stiller send up one of the hallmark buddy-cop shows of the seventies. This was a fresh idea nine years ago when Spike Jonze and the Beastie Boys did it in the video for "Sabotage"; five minutes of ridiculous rooftop jumps and freeze-frame double takes are about all you need before the joke gets old. Still, Wilson and Stiller have an appealing, casual chemistry (as they did in "Zoolander"), and some of the scenes go in unexpected directions. For period detail, the 1974 Ford Gran Torino takes center stage, but cheers to the prop master who found the vintage rubber slingshot. Directed by Todd Phillips, who can't get enough of seventies television: his next announced project is an adaptation of "The Six Million Dollar Man."—*M.A.* (Battery Park 11, Chelsea Cinemas, Cinema 3rd Avenue, 42nd Street E Walk, Kips Bay Theatre, Lincoln Square, Orpheum VII, 34th Street Theatre, and Union Square.)

TAKING LIVES
Angelina Jolie in Jodie Foster mode as an F.B.I. agent on the track of a serial killer. The cast, which includes Ethan Hawke, Kiefer Sutherland, and Gena Rowlands, does a satisfying job of fleshing out their thinly written characters, and the director, D. J. Caruso, imparts a murky visual flair reminiscent of early David Fincher films. But the haphazard story is packed with too many red herrings, and it's tedious to watch the cast hit all the marks of a serial-killer thriller (the psychosexual deviant, the lonely farmhouse, the suspiciously brooding detective, etc.). All in all, another undistinguished movie in a played-out genre.—*B.D.* (Astor Plaza, Battery Park 11, Chelsea West, Cinema 2, 42nd Street E Walk, Kips Bay Theatre, Lincoln Square, Orpheum VII, 34th Street Theatre, and Union Square.)

ALSO PLAYING

THE BATTLE OF ALGIERS
Film Forum.
GREENDALE
Sunshine Cinema.
JERSEY GIRL
Battery Park 11, Chelsea Cinemas, Cinema 1, East 86th Street Cinemas, Empire 25, Kips Bay Theatre, Lincoln Square, 34th Street Theatre, and Union Square.
NOI
Village East Cinemas.
OSAMA (3/8/04)
Empire 25 and Lincoln Plaza Cinemas.
SCOOBY-DOO 2: MONSTERS UNLEASHED
Battery Park 11, East 86th Street Cinemas, 84th Street Sixplex, Empire 25, Kips Bay Theatre, 19th Street East 6, 64th and 2nd, 34th Street Theatre, and Village East Cinemas.
TOUCHING THE VOID (1/19/04)
Lincoln Plaza Cinemas, 64th and 2nd, and Sunshine Cinema.

THEATRE ADDRESSES

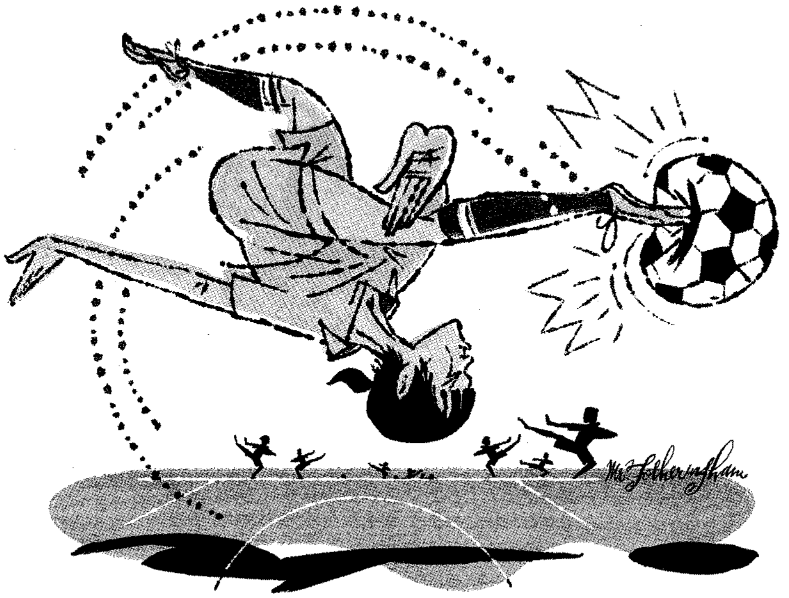
Unless noted, call 212-777-FILM for show times.

Angelika Film Center, 18 W. Houston St.
Astor Plaza, 44th St. at Broadway.
Battery Park 11, West St. at Vesey St.
Beekman, Second Ave. at 66th St.
Chelsea Cinemas, 260 W. 23rd St.
Chelsea West, 333 W. 23rd St.
Cinema Classics, 332 E. 11th St. (212-677-6309).
Cinemas 1, 2, and 3, Third Ave. at 60th St.
Cinema Village, 22 E. 12th St. (212-924-3363).
East 86th Street Cinemas, Third Ave. at 86th St.
84th Street Sixplex, Broadway at 84th St.
Empire 25, on 42nd St. near Eighth Ave. (212-398-3939).
First & 62nd Cinemas, 400 E. 62nd St.
42nd Street E Walk, 42nd St. near Eighth Ave.
Kips Bay Theatre, Second Ave. at 32nd St.
Lincoln Plaza Cinemas, Broadway at 63rd St. (212-757-2280).
Lincoln Square, Broadway at 68th St.
Metro Twin, Broadway at 99th St.
New York Twin, Second Ave. at 66th St.
19th Street East 6, Broadway at 19th St.
Orpheum VII, Third Ave. at 86th St.
Paris, 4 W. 58th St. (212-688-3800).
Pioneer Theatre, 155 E. 3rd St. (212-254-3300).
Quad Cinema, 34 W. 13th St.
72nd Street East, Third Ave. at 71st St.
64th and 2nd, Second Ave. at 64th St.
62nd & Broadway, 62 W. 62nd St.
Sunshine Cinema, 139-143 E. Houston St.
Sutton 1 and 2, Third Ave. at 57th St.
34th Street Theatre, 312 W. 34th St.
Union Square, Broadway at 13th St.
Village East Cinemas, Second Ave. at 12th St.
Village Theatre VII, Third Ave. at 11th St.
Ziegfeld, 141 W. 54th St.

REVIVALS, CLASSICS, ETC.

Titles with a dagger are reviewed above.

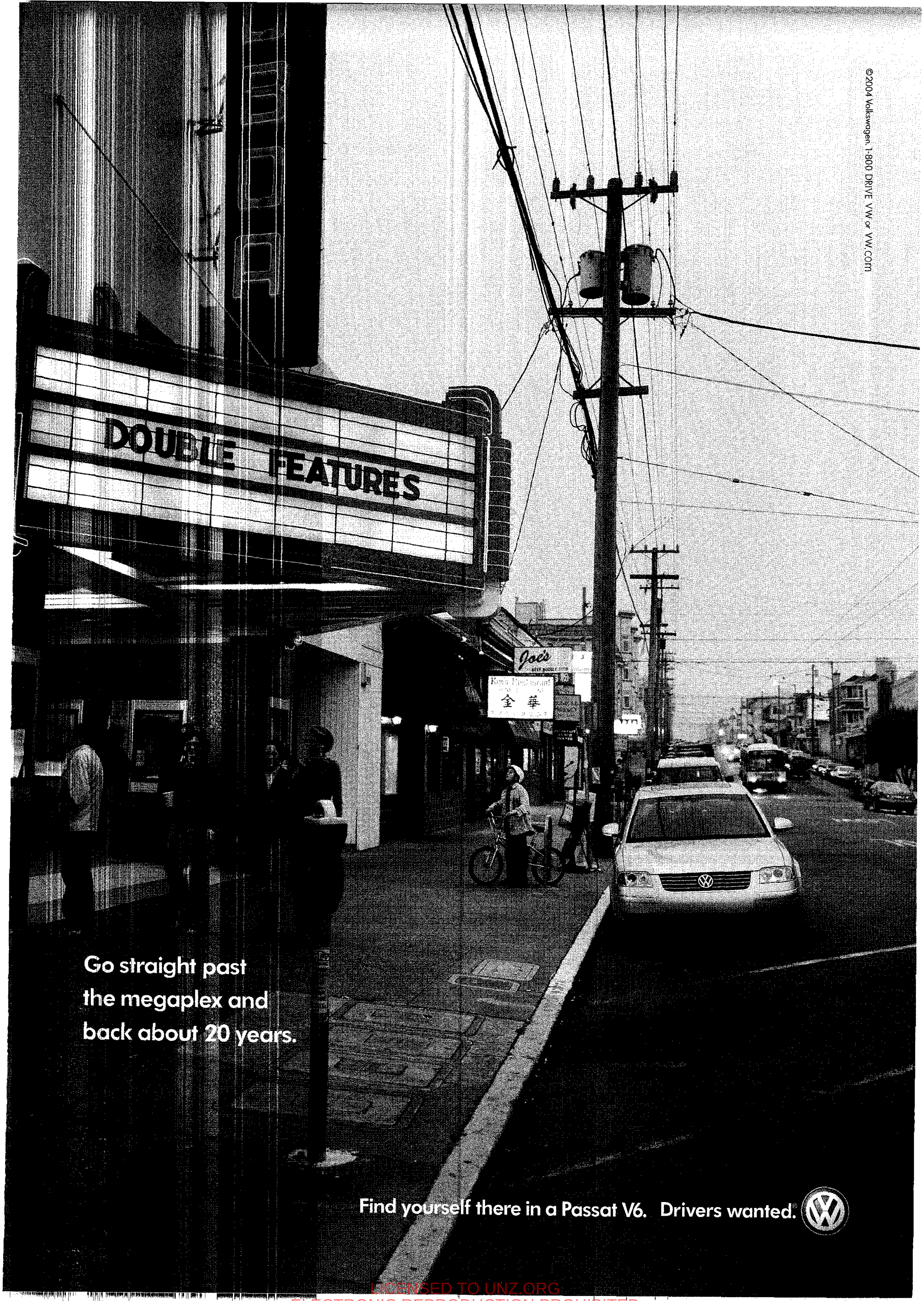
AMERICAN MUSEUM OF THE MOVING IMAGE
35th Ave. at 36th St., Astoria (718-784-0077)—A retrospective of the Haitian director Raoul Peck. April 2 at 7:30: "Man by the Shore" (1993; in Haitian). ♦ April 3 at 2: "Haitian Corner" (1987-1988). ♦ April 3 at 4:30: "Desounen: Dialogue with Death" (1994) and "Profit and Nothing But!" (2001; in English, French, and Haitian). ♦ April 3-4 at 6:30: "Lumumba" (†). ♦ April 4 at 2: "Falling Bodies" (1997; in French and English). ♦ April 4 at 4:30: "Lumumba: Death of a Prophet" (1991; in French).



Stephen Chow's "Shaolin Soccer," a martial-arts comedy, opens April 2.

EDWIN FOTHERINGHAM

ANTHOLOGY FILM ARCHIVES
32 Second Ave., at 2nd St. (212-505-5110)—April 1 at 7, April 2 at 9, April 3 at 6:30, and April 4 at 4 and 9: "L'Humanité" (1999, Bruno Dumont; in French). ♦ April 2 at 7, April 3 at 4:30 and 9:30, and April 4 at 7: "Life of Jesus" (1997, Dumont; in French).
BAM ROSE CINEMAS
30 Lafayette Ave., Brooklyn (718-777-3456)—Selections from the New Festival. March 31 at 4:30 and 7: "No Secret Anymore" (2003, Joan E. Biren). ♦ March 31 at 9:10: "Beloved, Sister" (2003, Oskar Roehler). ♦ Through April 11: A Raymond Depardon retrospective. All films are in French. April 1 at 4:30, 6:50, and 9:10: "Numéros Zéros" (1977). ♦ April 2 at 2, 4:30, 6:50, and 9:10: "Empty Quarter: A Woman in Africa" (1985). ♦ April 3 at 2 and 6:50: "Untouched by the West" (2002). ♦ April 3 at 4:30 and 9:10: "Captive of the Desert" (1990). ♦ April 4 at 2, 5:15, and 8:45: "Africas: What About the Pain?" (1996). ♦ British horror films. April 5 at 4:30, 6:50, and 9:10: "Tales from the Crypt" (1972, Freddie Francis). ♦ April 6 at 4:30, 6:50, and 9:10: "Corruption" (1967, Robert Harford-Davis).
FILM FORUM
W. Houston St. west of Sixth Ave. (212-727-8110)—Through April 15: An Orson Welles retrospective. March 31 at 1, 4:35, and 8:10: "Ricotta" (1962, Pier Paolo Pasolini) and "Lord Mountdrago" (1955, George Moore O' Ferrall). ♦ March 31 at 2:20, 5:55, and 9:30: "The V.I.P.s" (1963, Anthony Asquith). ♦ April 2-4 at 1:10, 4:05, 7, and 9:55 and April 5 at 1:10 and 4:05: "F for Fake" (1976, Orson Welles). ♦ April 2-4 at 2:50, 5:45, and 8:40 and April 5 at 2:50: "The Immortal Story" (†). ♦ April 5 at 6:40 and 9:25: "Macbeth" (†) and "Return to Glennascaul" (1952, Hilton Edwards). ♦ April 6 at 1, 5:20, and 9:40: "Prince of Foxes" (1949, Henry King). ♦ April 6 at 3:05 and 7:25: "The Black Rose" (1950, Henry Hathaway). ♦ Through April 8: Columbia 3-D Thursdays. April 1 at 1:20, 3:20, 5:20, 7:20, and 9:20: "The Mad Magician" (1954, John Brahm) and "Spooks" (1953, Jules White).
FLORENCE GOULD HALL
55 E. 59th St. (212-355-6160)—Through May 11: "The Undeclared War: The Algerian War on Film." April 6 at 12:30, 3:30, 6:30, and 9: "The Little Soldier" (1960, Jean-Luc Godard; in French).
GRAMERCY THEATRE
127 E. 23rd St. (212-777-4900)—Recent acquisitions. April 5 at 6: "Election" (1999, Alexander Payne). ♦ The films of Sofia Coppola. April 6 at 6: "Lick the Star" (1998) and "The Virgin Suicides" (1999).
SUNSHINE CINEMA
139-143 E. Houston St. (212-358-0573)—Midnight movies. April 2-3: "Clash of the Titans" (1981, Desmond Davis).
THALIA THEATRE
Symphony Space, Broadway at 95th St. (212-864-5400)—Music films and documentaries. April 3 at 1: "One Night the Moon" (2001, Rachel Perkins) and "Kumu Hula: Keepers of a Culture" (1989, Robert Mugge). ♦ April 3 at 4: "We Love You Like a Rock" (1994, Ashley James) and "Cool & Crazy" (2001, Knut Eric Jensen). ♦ April 3 at 8: "Song of the Earth" (2002, Jorge), "Bomba: Dancing the Drum" (2000, James), and "Cuba Feliz" (1999, Karim Dridi).
WALTER READE THEATRE
Lincoln Center (212-875-5600)—Through April 4: "New Directors/New Films." Screenings will be held at Walter Reade Theatre, Alice Tully Hall, and the Gramercy Theatre. See www.filmlinc.com for venues. March 31 at 6: "Untold Scandal" (2003, E J-yong; in Korean). ♦ March 31 at 6 and 8:45 and April 1 at 6: "Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter . . . and Spring" (2003, Kim Ki-duk; in Korean). ♦ March 31 at 9: "Three Step Dancing" (2003, Salvatore Mereu; in Sardinian). ♦ April 1 at 6, April 2 at 8:30, and April 3 at 9: "Vodka Lemon" (2003, Hiner Saleem; in Armenian, Kurdish, and Russian). ♦ April 1 at 8:30 and April 2 at 8:15: "Silent Waters" (2003, Sabiha Sumar; in Urdu and Punjabi). ♦ April 1 at 8:45 and April 3 at 3:45: "Checkpoint" (2003, Yoav Shamir; in Hebrew). ♦ April 2 at 6 and April 4 at 3:30: "Le Monde Vivant" (2003, Eugène Green; in French). ♦ April 2 at 6 and April 4 at 1: "Control Room" (2003, Jehane Noujaim; in Arabic and English). ♦ April 3 at 1:30 and April 4 at 6: "Kounandi" (2003, Apolline Traoré; in Arabic). ♦ April 3 at 6 and April 4 at 8:15: "Berlin Blues" (2003, Leander Haussmann; in German).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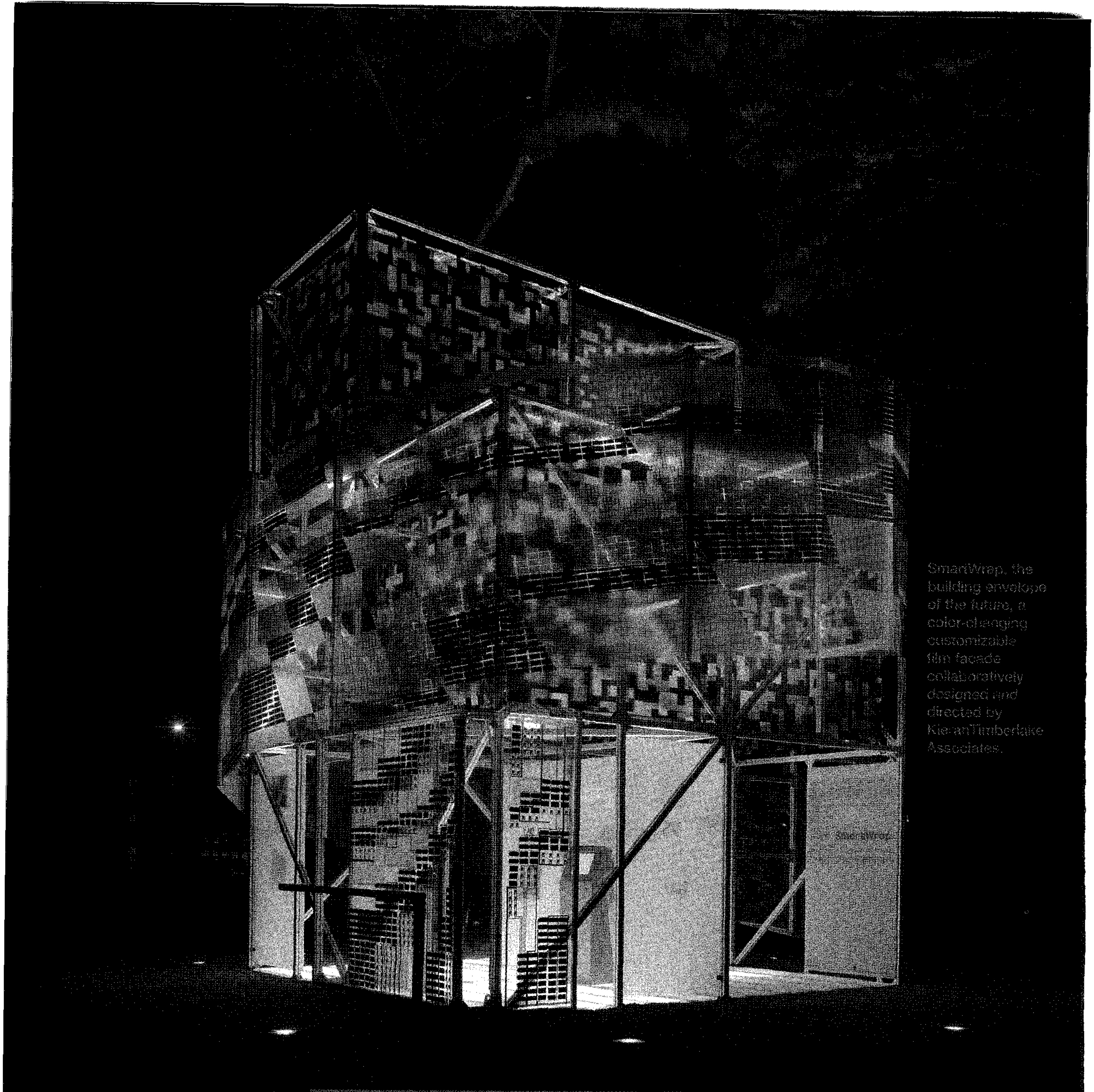

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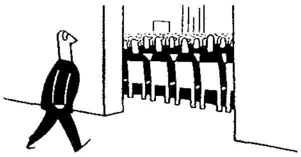
THE NEW YORKER

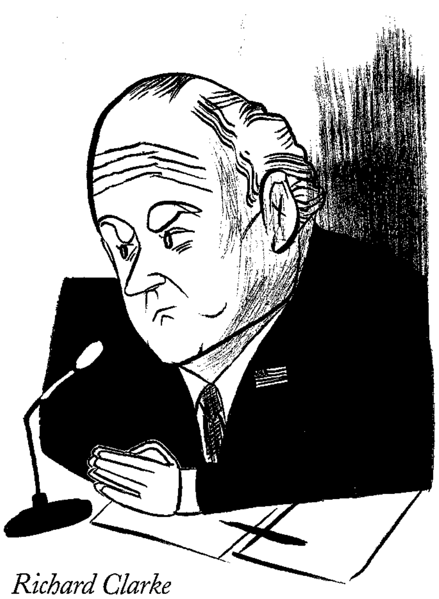
THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
CAMPAIGNS



As the war in Iraq enters its second year, Americans find themselves trapped in an epistemological black hole: the war's end recedes into an indefinite future while its beginning grows daily more contentious and obscure. Before the war, the sight of United Nations arms inspectors emerging empty-handed from Iraqi arms depots suspected of harboring large stocks of biological and chemical weapons brought a typically oracular pronouncement from Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. "Absence of evidence," he said, "is not evidence of absence." The inspectors' inability to turn up weapons of mass destruction cast doubt not on their existence but on the proposition that inspections—or anything short of an invasion and occupation of Iraq—could ever find them. War was imperative.

Then, on January 28th of this year, absence of evidence became, precisely, evidence of absence. That day, David Kay, who headed the Iraq Survey Group, told members of the Senate Armed Services Committee that the arsenals President Bush had depicted as the heart of a "gathering threat" that compelled the country to go to war did not exist. Into the vacuum left by the missing weapons have swirled all the demons of political combat unleashed by what promises to be an extraordinarily bitter election campaign driven by powerful undercurrents of mistrust and fear. Americans go on dying in Iraq, and the war remains central to American politics, but the major reason that the Administration offered for fighting it has disappeared. Now Richard A. Clarke, the former chief of counterterrorism at the National Security Council, has come forward to argue that the Iraq war, far from being "the central front in the war on terror," as the President contends, is, rather, a diversion from it. Last week, Clarke told the commission investigating the attacks of September 11, 2001, "By invading Iraq, the President of the United States has greatly undermined the war on terrorism." Clarke, who was a registered Republican in the last election, has held senior national-security positions in four Administrations and probably knows more about counterterrorism policy than any other government official, has described how President Bush, the day after the attacks, ordered him, "in a very intimidating way," to "see if Saddam did this, see if he's linked in any way." In Clarke's telling, from the first hours after the attacks the President and other Administration officials pressed strongly for a connection to Iraq. "I think they wanted to believe there was a connection, but the C.I.A. was sitting there, the F.B.I. was sitting there, and I was sitting there saying, 'We've looked at this issue for years. For years we've looked for a connection, and there's just no connection,' " Clarke said. His version of events strongly supports other eyewitness accounts, including that of former Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill, that the Administration's determination to invade Iraq long predated September 11th—implying that the reasons for the war were arrived at after the fact.



Richard Clarke

Last May, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz explained in an interview with a reporter from *Vanity Fair* that, in deciding how to persuade Americans to go to war, "we settled on the one issue that everyone could agree on, which was weapons of mass destruction as the core reason." As we now know, Administration officials took the widely held assumption that Iraq possessed chemical and biological weapons and, using dubious evidence, twisted it into a claim that Iraq would soon have nuclear weapons, making the threat, in Dean Acheson's Cold War phrase, "clearer than truth."

ILLUSTRATIONS BY TOM BACHTELL

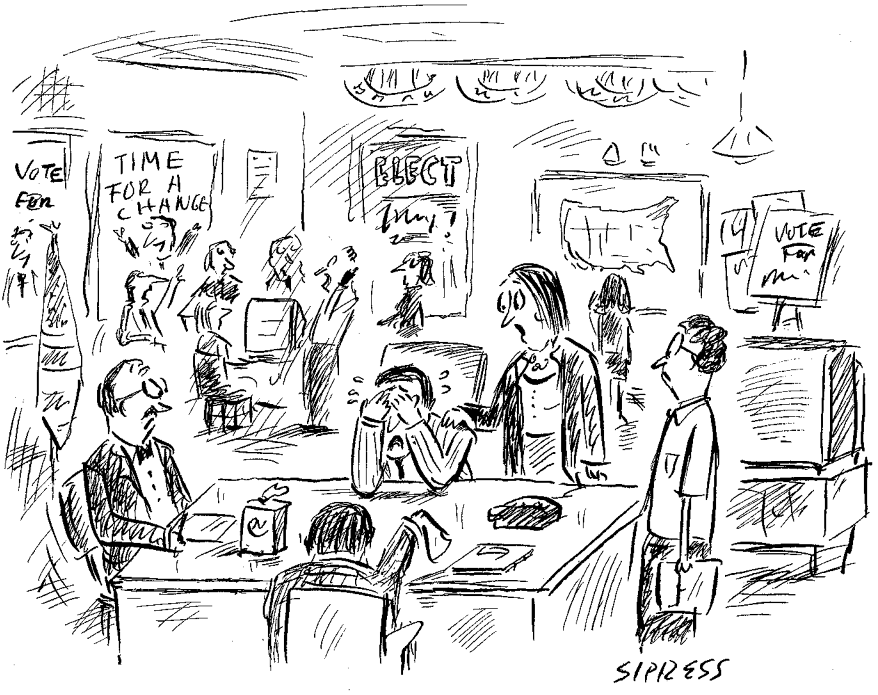
Until, that is, as Hans Blix put it, the occupation revealed that "the U.N. and the world had succeeded in disarming Iraq without knowing it."

For the Administration's credibility, both at home and abroad, the result has been catastrophic. President Bush, finding himself on the defensive, fell back first on what Wolfowitz had termed the "criminal treatment of the Iraqi people" argument. Bush asked audiences, "Who would prefer that Saddam's torture chambers still be open? Who would wish that more mass graves were still being filled?" His answer, unspoken but plain, seems to be: Anyone who questions the wisdom of the war. Yet Wolfowitz himself contended last May that in Iraq the "criminal treatment" argument is "not a reason to put American kids' lives at risk." In the past few weeks, since Senator Kerry has emerged as the Democratic nominee, the President has begun resorting to more extreme rhetoric, implying that a vote for Kerry would be a vote for the terrorists. Kerry, in turn, can be expected to assert that the President left the country vulnerable to attack by doing little to combat terror before September 11th and, since then, by insisting on fighting, in Clarke's words, "an unnecessary and costly war in Iraq." The "evidence of absence" of the weapons of mass destruction has thus put the war, and its tenuous connection to terrorism—the issue on which, as Wolfowitz said in May, "there is the most disagreement" within the government—at the heart of the election campaign. It is not surprising that Clarke, by ridiculing that connection and by stating bluntly that the war made Americans less safe, drew from the highest Administration officials the ugliest personal attacks yet seen in the campaign.

America has endured fierce electoral struggles over war and peace before, most recently over Vietnam in 1968. This "war on terror" campaign, however, in its focus on the critical question of "Who can make us safer?," may come to more closely resemble the Red-baiting campaigns of the fifties or the elections after the Civil War in which rivals "waved the bloody shirt." But this campaign includes a shadow player the others lacked. For nearly a decade, Al Qaeda has attempted not to defeat the United States militarily but to gain adherents by building its image among Muslims as the only effective counter to America and to the moderate regimes that American power sustains. To this political program the Bush Administration sought to offer what it thought of as a political response: to "transform the Middle East," by way of war in Iraq. So far, the occupation has done much to diminish American prestige among the moderate Muslims it was meant to persuade—and has helped increase the prestige of those who make the claim, while they go on killing the occupiers, that they are the only effective opposition to American power.

In the United States, the debate over Iraq has encouraged a kind of corrosive, brutal politics that has at its center an appeal to personal fear. That leaves a powerful weapon in the hands of the terrorists, who gained enormously after the attacks in Madrid by appearing to swing Spain's election against a major ally of President Bush. No one can say what effect a terrorist attack would have on the American election. But the tone and the terms of the evolving struggle for political dominance here present the possibility that such an attack could similarly strengthen those whom both candidates have pledged to destroy.

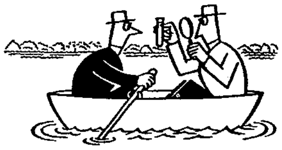
—*Mark Danner*



"We're not saying that nobody likes you. We're just saying you need to work on your likability."

THE WATERFRONT

OLD SPILL



In the quaint game of rhapsodizing about the city's foul waterways, Newtown Creek is generally a bastard stepsister to the more celebrated Gowanus Canal. The Newtown offers only one point of public access, and it has just one residential building along its banks. But it is much bigger than the Gowanus (three and a half miles long versus one and a half, and wider, too), far more polluted (twenty direct sewage portals all its own), more variably odorous, and, because it serves as the boundary between Brooklyn and Queens, far more peculiar for the fact of its relative obscurity and abandonment. In fact, few may know that the creek is currently home to the largest urban oil spill—seventeen million gallons, which is half again as big as the Exxon Valdez dump—in the history of North America.

Like dual Charons at the River Styx, two enterprising young city councilmen, Eric Gioia, of Long Island City, and David Yassky, of Greenpoint, arranged a boat tour of the creek last Thursday, to mark their commitment to cleaning it up; they'd recently joined a lawsuit, filed by Riverkeeper, the Hudson-watershed advocacy group, to hold ExxonMobil and others accountable. They are merely the latest in a line of government officials who over the years have tried, with varying levels of effort and uniformly little success, to undo the effects of a disastrous chain of events that originated in Greenpoint more than fifty years ago. Fuel from a nearby Standard Oil (now, roughly, ExxonMobil) plant seeped into the city sewers, then ignited. The explosion was so powerful that it sent twenty-five manhole covers flying and released untold amounts of oil into the Brooklyn-Queens aquifer, where the discharge began oozing glacially eastward toward Newtown Creek.

A rickety assemblage of wooden boards at the end of Manhattan Avenue, in Greenpoint, passes for the creek's lone dock. Captain John Lipscomb had tied up his converted lobster boat there, and was in the cabin studying a birder's field guide, as Basil Seggos, an investigator for Riverkeeper, greeted wary passengers. "There's a guy named Vinny who lives just up the street," Seggos said. "He's a big crabber. He feeds his family with it." Seggos held up a bucket-shaped contraption made of chicken wire: one of Vinny's crab traps. Although the state has designated the waterway "precluded" to aquatic life, blue crabs, bluefish, and striped bass apparently inhabit the lower end of the creek.

Councilman Gioia arrived, wearing a navy-blue suit and a red tie. "You guys brought your rods, right?" he said.

A boat ride along Newtown Creek is an opportunity not to be missed. "This really should be the Brooklyn-Queens Gold Coast," Gioia said, and he described a vision rather strikingly at odds with the creek's industrialized banks, invoking green spaces, ferries, and a winding bike path. The boat pulled into the channel and proceeded east, into the heart of darkness: past the Nemo, an abandoned tug from Panama, and a thriving demolition yard, with a sixty-ton flywheel for instant auto-shredding.

As the vessel headed up the creek, Seggos explained that the spill covers fifty-five acres of shorefront, in the shape of a pear, between the Greenpoint Avenue Bridge and the Kosciusko Bridge. A faint smell of sewage and brine gave way, in alternating turns, to sulfur and burning rubber and, occasionally, just plain gas station, depending on the changing ingredients: diesel, No. 2 home heating oil, naphtha.

Was it true, someone asked, that the creek was flammable? "I wouldn't smoke near it," Seggos said.

About a mile from the dock, Seggos saw a particularly viscous patch with an unfamiliar rusty tint, and he alerted Captain Lipscomb. As the boat idled, Seggos retrieved a jar and donned a pair of long rubber gloves. "Would somebody please hold my feet?" he asked, and then leaned out over the water. The sample he came up with looked to be three parts mud, one part tomato soup.

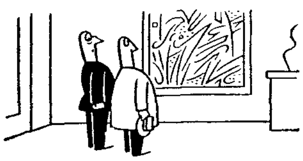
"It's not like this is just an oil spill that happened fifty years ago," Gioia said. "You're watching it happen in front of you. It makes you want to call 911: 'Police officer, I'm watching a crime being committed. Please stop it right now.' It's the smoking gun."

Of the original seventeen million gallons, fewer than four million have been successfully removed. Seggos held up the Ziploc bag in which he'd deposited his sample—one pint's worth. "Math lesson," he said. "There are a hundred million of these little jars in the spill not yet recovered."

"Environmental litigation is not for the fainthearted," Councilman Yassky said. The boat reversed course and headed downstream, back toward the oddly comforting spectacle of ordinary waterfront blight.

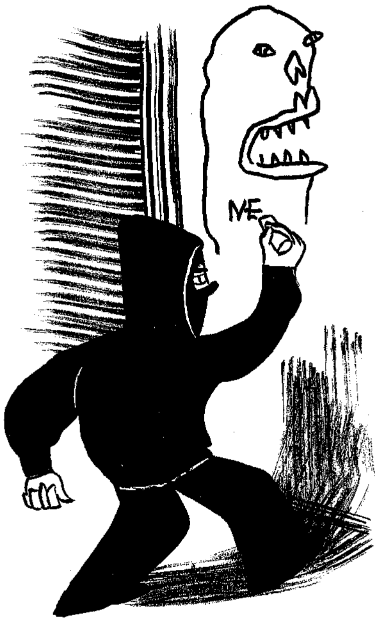
—Ben McGrath

STEALTH DEPT.
NECK FACE



For the past year and a half, a mischievous presence has been asserting itself on the city's street lamps, doorways, traffic-light-control boxes, and any other visible surface that it is in no one's interest to monitor or clean too diligently: drawings of snaggletoothed monsters and hairy limbs with sharpened nails, and oblique yet strangely pointed phrases such as "Beat with the ugly stick." These images are often signed "Neck Face," in angular capital letters that look like the work of an angry toddler or of Danny Torrance in "The Shining."

Neck Face is nineteen, little and shy, with black eyes and brows, and fanglike teeth of his own. He wears a parka with two thick paint markers—silver and black, "the Oakland Raiders combo"—zipped into the upper pocket, a pair of black high-tops tightened to "sprint mode," and an air of nonchalant alertness: he is always on the lookout for "neighborhood heroes." He is cagey about his identity: "It's like Batman, you know? No one knew who he was." Marsea Goldberg, who has a gallery in Los Angeles and last month displayed some of Neck Face's drawings—vampires in hot-pink cloaks; devilish people saying "You nasty" to each other—said, "He looks like a cross between Steven Tyler and Mick Jagger. He has this whole following of really cute young girls writing 'I ♥ Neck Face' throughout the subways." Goldberg said that on the final day of the show the musician Beck came in and bought five Neck Faces.



Neck Face

On a recent Saturday, Neck Face came in to Manhattan from Brooklyn, where he is currently staying on a friend's couch (hence the mushrooming presence of goblins in that borough), to walk around the East Twenties, the neighborhood where he got his start. On Lexington below Twenty-sixth Street, he pointed to a door where he had drawn a bubble head with baggy eyes and a discombobulated mouth. "I like messed-up teeth," he said. "Every other person draws stuff with good teeth. I've got fillings in every single tooth." He opened his mouth and revealed a metal armature. "I eat a lot of candy."

At the corner of Twenty-third and Lex, he saw a scrawl on the side of a deli that said, "Fuck Neck Face." "Someone told me about that," he said. "That sucks." He walked past a newsstand where he had designed an elaborate frieze: a bristly arm, a snake eating a heart, a mouth with "Neck Face" spelled out on each tooth, and the words "God Owes Me Money." ("He owes me five dollars," Neck Face said.) On Second Avenue, he saw a cobbler's sign with a rendering of a sharp stiletto, under which he'd drawn the pinned figure of a man. He chuckled ("Heh-heh") and said, "A guy getting stabbed with a high heel."

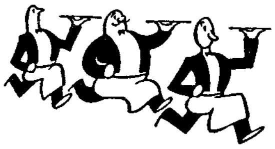
Neck Face is trying not to do too much graffiti these days—he has exhibitions coming up in San Francisco and London, and doesn't want to jeopardize them by getting caught—but at Seventh Street he saw something irresistible: a clear plastic panel swinging from the side of a phone booth. He glanced around quickly and signed his name. A few paces along, he stopped at a red door. Heh-heh. With his back to the door to look more casual, he drew an open mouth with short lines for teeth, a wishbone-like nose, and beady eyes, and wrote "Neck Face is ugly" underneath. At Third Street, there was a deli with a mechanical horse outside. "It'd be cool to write on that horse," he said, almost wistfully, and signed his name in black on its white flank. Heh-heh.

There is an immediacy to Neck Face's work and, though he is in art school, not much room for introspection. He doesn't know what Neck Face means. "I thought of it junior year of high school," he said. (Neck Face grew up an hour from San Francisco. His father has a tire shop, and one of Neck Face's favorite mediums is Mean Streaks, white grease pencils that are used for marking tires.) Many of Neck Face's relatives live in Mexicali, Mexico, and Goldberg, the gallerist, sees the influence of Mexican folk art. Neck Face shrugged, and said, "My brothers"—there are three of them—"all draw scary stuff. Not like perfectly rendered people—monsters and stuff. I grew up with cartoons." He allowed that he admires Edward Gorey and, especially, Charles Addams. "He's my favorite," Neck Face said. "It's, like, the stuff that people are afraid to laugh at."

—*Dana Goodyear*

THE SPORTING SCENE

DOUGH DREAMS



George Giove, a twenty-nine-year-old journeyman *pizzaiolo* (Italian for "pizza guy"), competes for the United States Pizza Team. He made his name in the freestyle pizza toss, on the strength of his double-dough toss-and-spin moves (across the shoulders, behind the back, through the legs, the whip, and the kick-flip), and for the creativity and flair of his routine, which he performs to pop music. Giove has a compact, chesty build, salami-size forearms, and quick hands. He speaks in a mixture of Brooklynese (when his grandparents came to America with their three sons, in 1971, they opened a pizzeria in Borough Park) and Staten Islandese (when Giove was a kid, some relatives migrated across the Verrazano Narrows and opened a place called Brother's Pizza, in Port Richmond). Giove is also not afraid to exploit his Italian heritage to appeal to contest judges. At the U.S. Team Trials last year, which he won, he chose Toto Cutugno's soft-rock anthem "L'Italiano" (the chorus is "I am the Italian, the real Italian") for his freestyle routine. And at the World Pizza Championships, which are held annually in Salsomaggiore Terme, in northern Italy (the 2004 Worlds are this week), he won a bronze medal in the best-pizza-maker event—this was at the height of Operation Shock and Awe, when popular sentiment in Italy was strongly antiwar—for what he called his "pace" pie (*pace* is Italian for "peace"), which is topped with bacon, zucchini, and chunks of herb cream cheese.

For years, the Italians dominated the Worlds. Then came Tony Gemignani, a ponytailed Californian with wide-open, acrobatic New World moves. Gemignani won world titles in 2000 and 2001, before abruptly retiring from competition and signing on as the U.S. coach. Before Giove made the team, he logged hundreds of hours studying videotapes of Gemignani and attempting every move that he saw.

On Staten Island the other day, during the late-afternoon lull at Brother's, a handful of slice buyers lined up at the front counter, while a pre-teen birthday party and some old couples in tracksuits occupied the dining room in back. George Giove sat at a brown Formica table with his uncle Filippo Giove; Filippo's twelve-year-old son, Filippo, Jr.; and George's half brother, Fabio, who was visiting from Italy. A recent issue of *Pizza Marketing Quarterly* lay on the table. George frowned at the picture of Siler Chapman, the twenty-year-old motocross champion turned competitive pizza tosser, that was on the cover. Filippo, Sr., said to his son, "Filly, get the dough."

A pile of unused pizza boxes was cleared away. As his father and uncle and cousins looked on, Filly spun the dough along one arm, across his shoulders, and down to his other hand, then, after a neat toss, caught the dough with his foot and flipped it back into the air. George didn't seem to like being upstaged, and soon began tossing his own dough on the periphery. Before long, he said to his cousin, "Filly, gimme the dough." George performed his repertoire with two doughs aloft simultaneously. After a while, most of the diners lost interest, except for an elderly couple at the next table, who went a little white when George announced that he was going to try a trick involving flaming dough.

George took a break. He was beaded with sweat. (He explained that the national team's training regimen doesn't include "jogging or lifting weights or that kind of stuff.") He was in an expansive mood. He mentioned that he was working on a new routine involving the "Flashdance" theme song. One of his dreams, he said, is to start a pizza school in the States, where "people could learn from pizza professionals how to make dough that doesn't rip or have holes."

Still, George is ambivalent about the American pizzeria diaspora. "If Greeks are good at making gyros, Greeks should make gyros," he said. And stiffer international competition—Austrians, Spaniards, Japanese—doesn't particularly faze him. "The Japanese are great with rubber dough—they've got speed, they can do any moves," he said. "But once they get down to real dough they just screw up. They also use a lot of fish in their pizzas, which, honestly, I'm against." He looked troubled. "Who likes fish pizza, anyway?"

—*Field Maloney*

THE FINANCIAL PAGE
PUNCTUALITY PAYS

At high noon last October 1st, the citizens of Ecuador did something they'd never dreamed possible: they synchronized their watches. In doing so, they embarked on a Campaña Contra la Impuntualidad, a national crusade against lateness. A group called Participacíon Ciudadana had orchestrated the initiative in order to combat Ecuadorans' notoriously cavalier attitude toward time. The group enlisted the country's only Olympic gold medallist, the race-walker Jefferson Pérez, as a spokesman, plastered cities and villages with posters ("Inject yourself each morning with a dose of responsibility, respect, and discipline"), and persuaded companies to bar tardy workers from meetings. Even President Lucio Gutiérrez, infamously unpunctual, vowed to participate. His spokesman, going on television to announce this vow, arrived at the studio, needless to say, several minutes late.

Such a campaign may seem farcical—no more critical to a country's national interest than a crusade against poor spelling or bad breath—but it arose out of a basic economic fact: punctuality pays. According to one study, chronic lateness costs Ecuador $2.5 billion a year—hardly small change in a country with a gross domestic product of just twenty-four billion dollars. The fundamental challenge for a modern economy is to coördinate the actions of millions of independent people so that goods may be produced and services delivered as efficiently as possible. It's a lot easier to do this when people are where they're supposed to be when they're supposed to be there. This is especially true in light of recent innovations such as just-in-time manufacturing. Dell computer's suppliers have to be able to deliver parts to Dell's factories within ninety minutes. Under those conditions, "I'll get to it later" won't do.

The social psychologist Robert Levine, who has devoted decades to studying people's ideas about time, suggests that cultures can be divided into those which live on "event time," where events are allowed to dictate people's schedules, and those which live on "clock time," where people's schedules dictate events. Unsurprisingly, countries that live on clock time are more successful economically—if perhaps less fun at night—than those which do not. In part, that's because attitudes toward time tend to pervade nearly every aspect of a culture. In hyper-punctual countries like Japan, pedestrians walk fast, business transactions take place quickly, and bank clocks are always accurate. In less punctual places, such as Indonesia, pedestrians amble, workers dawdle, and bank clocks are usually wrong. In other words, Ecuadorans, who have been living on event time—known locally as Ecuadoran time—are trying to revolutionize the way they live and work.

CHRISTOPH NIEMANN

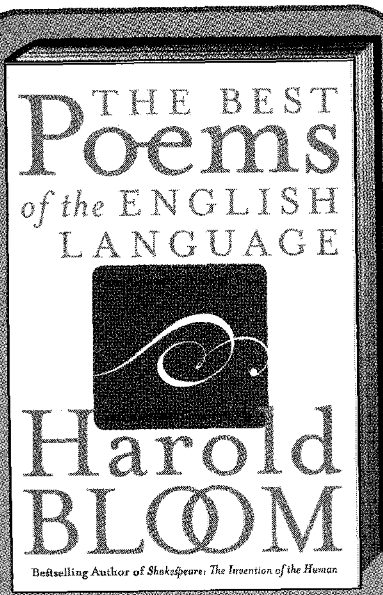
Can they do it? There are obvious obstacles. Dawdling can be quite pleasant, especially when it's what you're accustomed to. There is also the tricky question of class. Lateness can be a way for the rich and powerful to assert themselves, to show how much more valuable their time is. In Ecuador, members of the military and the government are the most notorious offenders, and businessmen are far more likely to show up late than blue-collar workers are. And, as the economists Kaushik Basu and Jorgen Weibull have pointed out, in a country where everyone is always late, it becomes rational to be late. There's no point in getting to a meeting on time if no one is going to be there. Tardiness feeds on itself, creating a vicious cycle of *mañana, mañana.*

What Ecuador really has to overcome is the idea that culture is destiny, that showing up late is just what Ecuadorans do. In the past two decades, great attention has been paid to the economic significance of cultural predispositions—to the role, for example, of trust and risk-aversion in the old Soviet-bloc countries' fitful attempts to adapt to capitalism. Culture, we have discovered, matters more than many bondholders wish it did. But it is not immutable. In Western Europe and the United States, people once had to learn to become punctual, too. At the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, factory owners applied enormous effort (and plenty of coercion) just to get workers to show up on the right day, let alone at the right hour. The historian E. P. Thompson chronicled how the rise of the factory in Great Britain profoundly altered people's notion of time, from one based on the calendar to one based on the clock. The shift from piece-rate work (where you were paid for what you produced) to hourly wages (where you were paid for how long you worked) also helped, as did the standardization of time zones, in the late nineteenth century.

By comparison, the people of Ecuador have it easy; they already have clocks, time zones, and hourly wages. All they need now is a kick in the pants. If you persuade enough people to be on time, it becomes rational for everyone else to be on time, too. The more people there are who are punctual, the greater the benefits of punctuality. That's why a national campaign, silly as it may seem, makes some sense. It's a call to shame, a nationwide tapping of the watch.

Maybe someday Ecuador will be welcomed into the community of punctual nations. And that might lead an observer with a sanguine cast of mind to wonder whether similar efforts might help wipe out other corrosive cultural tendencies around the world, like corruption. We are constantly being told, about social norms in places like the Middle East, "That's just the way it is." Perhaps. But by taking on tardiness Ecuador's citizens are telling us something else: culture is what you do, not who you are. It's about time, too.

—*James Surowiecki*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THE MUSIC SCENE

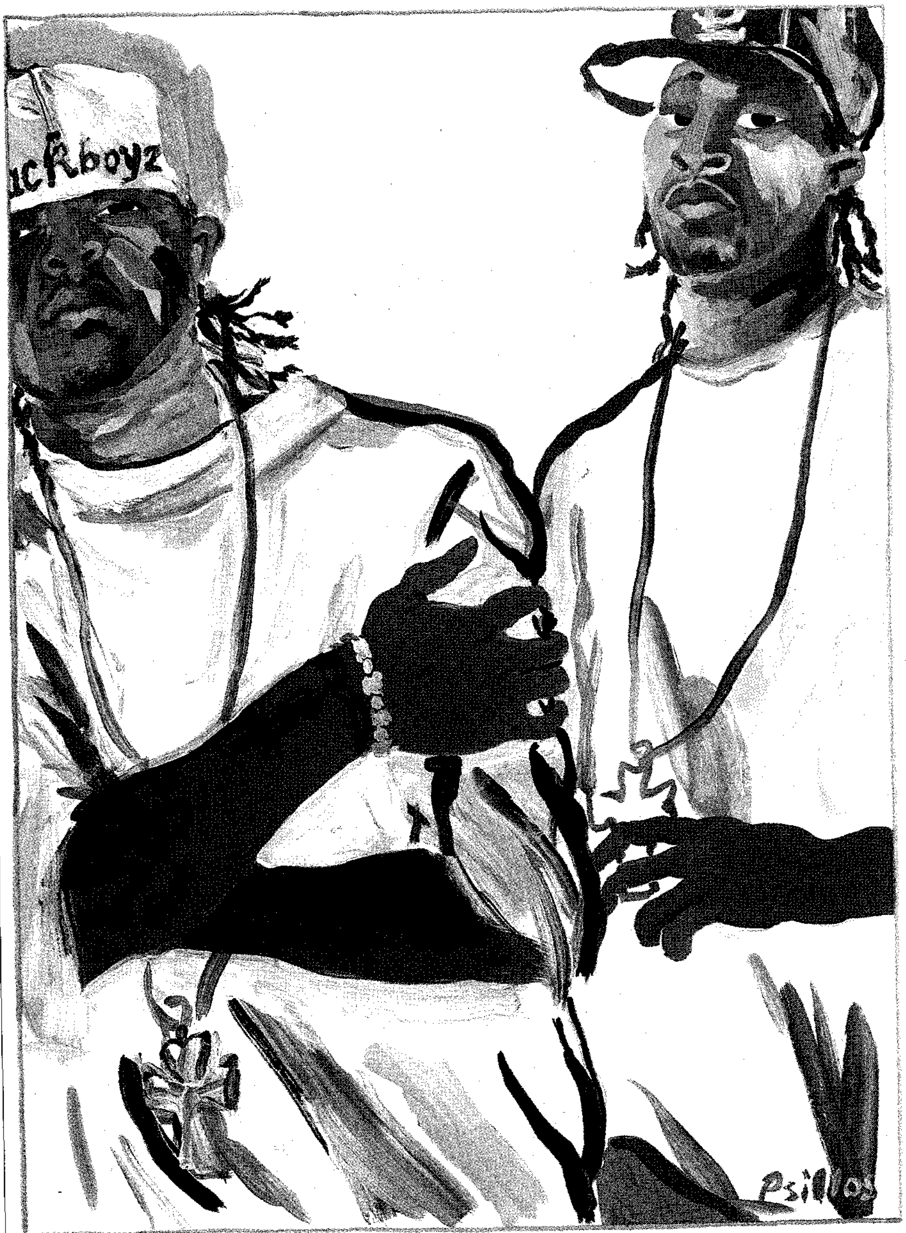
SELLING THE BEAT

A pair of hip-hop producers tries to break a new act.

BY JAKE HALPERN

Club La Vela, a sprawling hacienda on a swampy stretch of coast along the Florida Panhandle, claims to be the largest night club in the country, accommodating up to seventy-five hundred people in its many dance halls and bars. For several weeks each March—during the American college-age bacchanal known as spring break—Club La Vela's occupancy roughly equals the year-round population of the surrounding community of Panama City Beach. On a recent Friday night, the club was overrun with women in fishnet camisoles and halter tops and men wearing Kangol hats and thick strands of Mardi Gras beads and reeking of aftershave.

Movement in the corridors was prac-



The Trackboyz, Mark Williams and Joe Kent, helped build St. Louis's rap culture.

tically impossible, but every hour or so the d.j. played a wildly popular new hip-hop song called "Tipsy," and, with a great heaving and sloshing, the crowd convulsed toward the main dance floor. As the opening beats blasted through the club, men took off their shirts and twirled them like lassos; groups of women climbed into an elevated iron cage to dance with each other. People began to chant the lyrics—"*Urr'*body in the *club* gettin' *tipsy!*"—and when the singer said, "Hands in the air if you cats as drunk as me," nearly everyone complied. "The beat is just so good that it makes me want to shake my booty!" a heavyset girl with a blinking penlight wedged into her bra said exuberantly.

Mark (Tarboy) Williams and Joe (Capo) Kent, a pair of hip-hop producers from St. Louis known as the Trackboyz, are responsible for "Tipsy" 's infectious beat, and they also discovered J-Kwon, the teen-age rapper who wrote and sang the lyrics. They produced thirteen of the fifteen tracks on J-Kwon's début album, "Hood Hop," which will be released at the end of March by So So Def, the rap imprint of Arista Records. "Tipsy," the hit single, is currently No. 3 on *Billboard's* Hot 100 chart and is poised to become the ubiquitous party song of the season, playing in every night club, bar, and Taco Bell in America.

Both Williams, who is twenty-five, and Kent, who is twenty-six, started out as performers. Williams rapped, buying his background music, or "beats," from a producer in North St. Louis, who charged three hundred dollars for a four-minute track—too much, Williams thought, and decided that he needed to get his own equipment. He raised the money any way he could: "I had a job, sold drugs. I worked everywhere—bagging groceries, cutting the grass in the summer, handing out flyers. Anything that was a hustle, I did." He bought a keyboard and a drum machine and began selling beats at a discount—two hundred dollars a track—undercutting the competition. "That is basically how I cornered the market in St. Louis, selling beats to everybody for cheap," he says.

Williams was into drum machines, raw beats, and hard-hitting rap lyrics. In 1997, a rapper friend introduced him to Kent, who was raised in a family of musicians (his younger brother is an opera singer, his sister plays piano, and his father plays guitar), and preferred gospel music, percussion instruments, piano, and singing. "My old dude was a minister," Kent says. "When I was a kid, we went to church three to four times a week, in the evenings." Kent played drums for the church choir from the time he was seven, learned keyboard when he finished high school, and thought for a time of becoming an R. & B. singer. The combination of Williams's hip-hop and Kent's R. & B. worked, so they named themselves the Trackboyz, and started making beats in an impromptu studio that Williams had set up in his mother's basement. Soon they were doing a brisk business. "Our name started getting around," Williams says. "It was almost like selling drugs. You don't advertise, but the word gets out and people find out what you do. Before long, everybody was buying beats from us."

One of their first clients was a young rapper named Cornell Haynes, Jr., later nicknamed Nelly, whom Williams had met at a talent show in a club. Nelly, who has sold more than fifteen million albums, was the first St. Louis rapper to break nationally, with "Country Grammar," in 1999. (Nelly also initiated the widespread use of a quirky St. Louis dialect whereby "here" is pronounced "hurr"—as in Nelly's "Hot in Herre"—"there" becomes "thurr," and "everybody" is "urr'body.") Murphy Lee, a member of Nelly's band, the St. Lunatics, recently produced his first solo album, "Murphy's Law," which went gold. Chingy, another St. Louis rapper, whose 2003 album "Jackpot" went double platinum, has a single, "One Call Away," currently at No. 2 on the *Billboard* Hot 100. The atmosphere in St. Louis is now a little like that of Nashville in the nineteen-thirties, with the Grand Ole Opry, or of Detroit in the sixties, with Motown Records. "Everyone has an eye on St. Louis now that there is some action and some stars coming out of there," Mike Caren, a vice-president of A. & R. at Atlantic Records, says. "Everyone wants to know what the artists are doing, what the producers are developing, and who their next protégés are."

For the past two years, the Trackboyz have lived in a two-story house in an upper-middle-class suburb of St. Louis called Hazelwood. When I visited there one Saturday last fall, a middle-aged

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neighbor was mowing his lawn, and a group of children were skateboarding on the sidewalks. A couple of women wearing fanny packs power walked past. For a moment, I thought that I had taken the wrong exit off the highway.

Williams met me on the front steps. He is slender and intense—his voice is always husky, as if he'd been up all night talking—and he wore baggy pants and a platinum chain with a diamond-studded treble clef. He offered me a complicated five- or six-part handshake, which I fumbled my way through, then escorted me around the first floor, which was lined with tanks containing reptiles (including two monitor lizards and two well-fed pythons) and down to a studio in the basement. Williams and Kent had just finished the instrumentals for one of J-Kwon's songs, "You and Me." They'd put down drum tracks over two live guitars and a keyboard bass line. "We were trying to achieve a more laid-back, summertime feeling," Williams said later. "It's a summer-type barbecue-type song." They were waiting for J-Kwon to finish the lyrics.

DAISIES

It is possible, I suppose, that sometime
  we will learn everything
there is to learn: what the world is, for example,
  and what it means. I think this as I am crossing
from one field to another, in summer, and the
  mockingbird is mocking me, as one who either
knows enough already or knows enough to be
  perfectly content not knowing. Song being born
of quest he knows this: he must turn silent
  were he suddenly assaulted with answers. Instead

oh hear his wild, caustic, tender warbling ceaselessly
  unanswered. At my feet the white-petalled daisies display
the small suns of their centerpiece, their—if you don't
  mind my saying so—their hearts. Of course
I could be wrong, perhaps their hearts are pale and
  narrow and hidden in the roots. What do I know.
But this: it is heaven itself to take what is given,
  to see what is plain; what the sun
lights up willingly; for example—I think this
  as I reach down, not to pick but merely to touch—
the suitability of the field for the daisies, and the
  daisies for the field.

—*Mary Oliver*

"Play him 'Tipsy,' " Kent said, nodding at me in lieu of a formal introduction. Everything about Kent's appearance was composed: his tracksuit was spotless and his hair was arranged in fastidious braids. Slender and of medium height, he was slouched deep into a chair.

Williams punched a few keys on an iMac and J-Kwon could be heard to say, in a lecturing tone of mock concern, "Teen drinking is ve-ry bad." Half a second later, he said, "Yo, I got a fake I.D., though," and the beat, like an entire stadium clapping and stomping in perfect unison, came thudding down. Heavy, syncopated breathing echoed the beat: "Ha-uh, ha-uh, ha-uh, ha-uh." After the first verse ("Everybody drunk out on the dance *floor* / Babygirl ass jiggle like she want *more*"), J-Kwon reached the chorus. "Now urr'body in the club gettin' tipsy," he sang in a ringing voice, then repeated the line in a breathless whisper. At one point, the bass became so loud that loose pens and coins in the room started to jitter and jump. Jermaine Dupri, the C.E.O. of So So Def, says that "Tipsy" is like a fusion of hip-hop and the big rock-and-roll sound of the seventies and eighties—disaffected black urban youth to the tune of Queen's "We Will Rock You."

Most hip-hop songs rely on a standard bass line that carries through the entire song, but the Trackboyz often start with instrumentals or vocals. "Our goal is to be unpredictable, so we just bring in the bass line wherever it feels right," Williams said. They rarely use samples—audio segments borrowed from movies, television, video games, or other songs—which have become the clichéd backbone of many hits. "They won't do the good old scenario where you take a Sting song or a Bowie song and add a drum and rap over it," their sound engineer, Manny Marroquin, says.

Instead, the Trackboyz' songs for J-Kwon are filled with breathy gasps, visceral grunts, heel-pounding stomps, and wild clangs that sound like someone smashing two garbage-can lids together. "We'll take a microphone and record the sound of me clapping my hands or saying, 'Ohhhhh.' Then we will take that sound, send it into the drum machine, play with it, and use it to make a beat," Williams said. "People often think these sounds are coming from instruments, but they're really not." They throw in a bit of live guitar and bass, for contrast; the last thing they do is bring in a rapper to riff off the beats. Making a track's worth of beats, he said, can take anywhere from twenty minutes—as with "Tipsy"—to a day or two.

In the late nineties, the Trackboyz got a deal to produce a St. Louis rap group named Abyss, which was signed to Atlantic Records. The album was never released, but Williams and Kent made a number of important acquaintances in the music industry. Mike Caren, at Atlantic, has bought their beats and passed them along to his artists, musicians such as the Kentucky-based rap sextet Nappy Roots and the hip-hop artist Trina. A few years ago, he introduced the Trackboyz to Jeremy Geffen, a manager in Los Angeles, who now represents them. Geffen says that these days Kent and Williams charge roughly fifty thousand dollars a track.

The Trackboyz have been reluctant

to develop a trademark sound—"Once your sound dies out, your career dies out," Williams says—and they have worked with artists as varied as Eminem's group D-12, Angie Stone, and Robin Gibb, of the Bee Gees. They produced Nelly's hit "Air Force Ones" and Nappy Roots' "Po' Folks," which was nominated for a Grammy in 2003. They haven't yet achieved the name recognition of producers like the Neptunes, but, according to Dupri, "their name is definitely poppin' in the music business."

The Trackboyz' ambition is not just to produce songs for established artists but to cultivate new stars. "We wanted to build the Trackboyz legacy—same way Cash Money came in," Kent said.

"Same way Dr. Dre came in," Williams replied.

"Same way Puffy came in."

"Same way Timbaland came in. Same way J.D."—Jermaine Dupri—"came in."

"By making their artists into stars, they got what they rightly deserved."

"If I go out there and do a song for Jay-Z, do one for Janet, do one for 50 Cent, Usher, that would never give me as much credit as if I break my own artist, if Kwon blows up," Williams said.

"Because at that point it's not you looking for them—everybody comes checking for you."

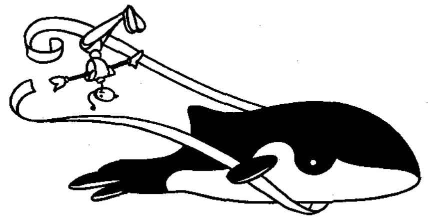
"There is no feeling like seeing somebody go from nothing to something—especially when you are a major part of it," Williams said. "You get addicted to breaking new acts."

The Trackboyz met J-Kwon in the spring of 2003, through a music manager named Sean (BD) Caldwell, who works as a scout for the hip-hop industry. BD, who spends his time listening to the homemade demos that he buys on street corners and searching out rap battles, found J-Kwon in the Third District, a rough patch of South St. Louis. J-Kwon had run away from his home, in the middle-class suburb of Bellville, Missouri, at thirteen. (J-Kwon's mother, Terry Jones, told me that he had nothing but scorn for his high school in Bellville. "It was not 'hip' enough here," she said. "It was too suburban, and there were no metal detectors, and the kids were too upscale.") In the Third District, he slept in abandoned cars, ran drug errands to make money, and wrote rap lyrics about his new experiences by the flame of a cigarette lighter. He relinquished his given name—Jerrell—for J-Kwon.

After auditioning J-Kwon over the telephone, the Trackboyz invited him to their studio and asked him to rap to an R. & B. song that they had been developing. J-Kwon has a gangly build, delicate features, and the irresistible grin of a mischief-maker. When Kent saw him, he says, he thought, Yeah, this little dude has got it. He did well with the R. & B. tune, too. "J-Kwon didn't write his lyrics for that kind of beat, but he knew how to match up with it," Williams said. "That is a skill that rappers and singers take years to learn."

Not long afterward, the Trackboyz invited J-Kwon, then seventeen, to move in with them, both to get him out of the inner city and, in a sense, to begin grooming him. Now eighteen, he has acquired a hefty gold necklace and a hunk of diamond for each ear. He clearly idolizes the Trackboyz, whom he calls his "uncles." Williams says that their home has been a good learning environment, and that J-Kwon has come to appreciate the value of doing chores like cleaning—though the only person I ever saw cleaning was a nineteen-year-old female fan named Sugar. (BD explained that J-Kwon often "siphoned off" his housework to various girls he met.)

In the late summer, after a few months' work in the studio, the Trackboyz arranged for J-Kwon, who had never been on an airplane before, to perform a showcase for executives at Arista Records, in Manhattan. According to several accounts of this meeting, J-Kwon strutted into the office where everyone was assembled, jumped onto a table, and shouted, "Give me my music!" Someone turned on a CD player, producing a loud, thumping rhythm that the Trackboyz had mixed with some subtler Funkadelic-like synthesizer sounds. After running through several of his raps, J-Kwon mooned Antonio Reid, then the C.E.O., took a bow, and thanked everyone individually for his time. "My performance was right out of the Third District," J-Kwon told me. "But it was corporate, too. They put me in there with the sharks, and you might as well say I was the biggest shark." A week after the showcase, Jermaine Dupri signed him to So So Def.



During my visit to St. Louis in November, "Tipsy" was released for radio play, and the Trackboyz began a fervent promotion of the song, hoping that if it took off there it would gain momentum and infiltrate listening markets across the country. One night, I went with BD and J-Kwon to a radio station in the suburb of Creve Coeur, where BD gave CDs and several vinyl copies of "Tipsy" to a small, pudgy d.j. who introduced himself as "Big Sexy KOOOL D.J. Kaos." Kaos wields a lot of influence in St. Louis hip-hop, so J-Kwon and BD spent the better part of an hour listening to him pontificate about the state of the business. Finally, as we got ready to leave, Kaos delivered his assurances. "You know that I am going to take care of you," he told J-Kwon.

Afterward, we took J-Kwon home and went to meet the Trackboyz at a dance hall called the Ambassador. The club was in a run-down, largely abandoned shopping plaza with rusting lampposts and a vintage nineteen-fifties marquee that listed the few remaining stores. "You got to go to places where hoodlums hang out, because they are the ones who will buy the album," BD said as we pulled in to the club's pothole-riddled parking lot. We passed a long line of people and headed directly to the front door, where an off-duty cop was operating a walk-through metal detector. The entire place was thundering with bass. As we made our way to the d.j.'s booth, there was a public announcement: "We need security!" For a moment, everyone stopped dancing to watch as a powerful blue spotlight focussed on a large man in a tracksuit and followed him as he tried to walk nonchalantly off the dance floor to the bar. Before he could get there, he was met by several bouncers, who grabbed him and shoved him out the door.

When Williams reached the booth, the d.j. shouted over the loudspeakers, "Hey, everybody, the Trackboyz are in the house!" and started to play "Tipsy." As people piled onto the dance floor, Williams stepped out of the booth. He looked tired. He had been making promotional stops at dance halls all night, and before the evening was over he had to hit the strip clubs, for good measure.

Throughout the late fall and early winter, "Tipsy" rose toward the top of the charts. It started by gaining popularity in a number of scattered urban markets—Las Vegas, Oakland, Miami—where it received substantial airtime on the major hip-hop stations. Sherita Saulsberry, the programming director at KVEG, in Las Vegas, said that it was played often at the station's club events. "There are songs where people will leave the dance floor; there are songs where people will get up and dance; and then there are songs like 'Tipsy,' where the entire dance floor gets packed and the whole energy of the club changes because of the song," she told me. By January 17th, the song had broken onto the *Billboard* Hot 100, at No. 96. A month later, it had climbed to No. 22. Around that time, I got a call from Jeremy Geffen. "This song is taking off like a rocket ship!" he said.

In February, I went to Los Angeles to visit the Trackboyz, who were finishing the final mixes on J-Kwon's album, with Manny Marroquin, the sound engineer. They were staying at a hotel in Beverly Hills, and we met in their room to watch the recently completed video for "Tipsy." In the video, J-Kwon throws a giant houseparty and dances with a lot of foxy older women. (Jermaine Dupri makes a cameo, as a pizza delivery boy.) The Trackboyz seemed pleased. "I like it because the focus is on J-Kwon," Williams said. He and Kent also showed me pictures of five new vans and trucks that had been ordered to shuttle J-Kwon around the country while he promotes the album; each was plastered with photographs of J-Kwon. "His picture needs to be bigger on the back," Williams said. "But I am cool with the vans."

Later that night, the Trackboyz went to Marroquin's studio, in North Hollywood, to mix "IC IC," the last song on J-Kwon's album. They presented Marroquin with a portable hard drive containing roughly fifty tracks, which encompassed all the sounds on "IC IC"—snare drums, bass, guitar, vocals, the clapping of hands, the stomping of boots. Marroquin downloaded them into his computer, which sent them over to a long mixing board, where each track had its own set of controls, for volume, treble, and bass. For the next several hours, they made subtle adjustments to individual sounds, turning down the treble on a grunting noise, or adding reverb to a boot stomp, or adjusting the volume of J-Kwon's voice during a particular verse. It was after midnight when the song was finished. Marroquin played it one more time. We listened to a mid-tempo beat in which a distorted bass and chants of "ho, ho, ho" were offset by hypnotic bells; all the while, J-Kwon bragged of his many exploits as a pimp—an act that requires some imagination for someone only four years past puberty. There were guest appearances from, among others, several of the St. Lunatics: Nelly, Murphy Lee, and a rapper named Ali. The lone female voice—throaty and tough—belonged to a little-known rapper named Ebony Eyes.

When I asked about her, Williams explained that she was a twenty-three-year-old from South St. Louis who helped support her four younger sisters by telemarketing and shining shoes. "She is our main focus right now," he said. "Here, listen to this." He played "I Can Act Like a Bitch," a rapid-fire song that warns of the dangers of trifling with her. The beat was faster and slightly less abrasive than the J-Kwon tracks. When the song was over, Williams said that the record labels were already asking about her. "We're going to do the same thing with Ebony that we did with J-Kwon," he said. "She's our next star." ♦

CONSTABULARY NOTES FROM ALL OVER

From the Fort Atkinson (Wis.) Daily Jefferson County Union.

Police responded to a residence in the 400 block of Jefferson Street after a man reported that his hat had been burned. The man stated that while he was sleeping, his roommate started the hat he was wearing on fire to wake him up "because he was bored."

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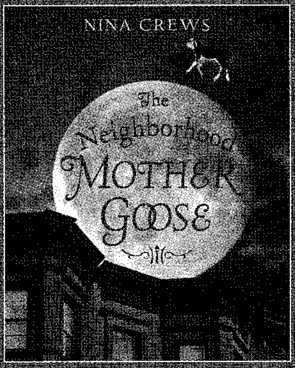

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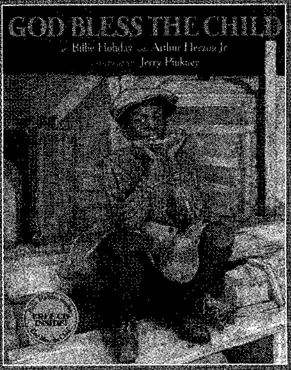

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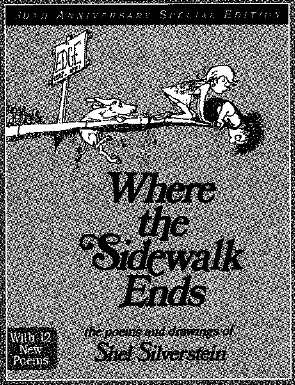

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SHOUTS & MURMURS

THE TRUTH

BY JOHN KENNEY

> Foreign correspondent Jack Kelley was forced to resign from USA Today last week after he repeatedly misled editors during an internal investigation into some of his stories, the paper's top editors said.
>
> —*Associated Press.*

Good morning. Actually, that's not true. I've just looked at my watch and realized that it's a few minutes after noon. That's a lie. It's early evening. I apologize.

So. Good evening. This isn't easy for me. Wait. That's also a lie. Oddly, this *is* easy for me. I don't know why, but it is. I very rarely mean it when I apologize to someone. Maybe that's why it's so easy.

Recently, questions have come to light regarding one . . . a few . . . every story I've written over a brief period . . . two years . . . eighteen years as editor . . . staff writer . . . freelance writer for a certain hit TV show . . . magazine . . . quarterly journal.

I'd like to take this opportunity to set the record straight. Perhaps I should start with my name. Which isn't John Kenney. It's Donald Twain. Actually, that's not true, either. Donald Twain is a name I heard in a movie once. My real name is Gig Young. No, it's not. It's Babson Jingleheimer-Schmidt. I'm sorry, that's not wholly true. My birth name is Dag Hammarskjöld Plaza. Was. Before I changed it. I'm so sorry. My name, my given name, is Gink Turtle-Glove. My father was from Belgium. Honest. This feels good.

I was wrong to file my series "Rebuilding Iraq: A Day in the Life of a Mother of Five." Wrong, too, to make up people's names and quotes. Especially wrong to name an Iraqi mother of five Mary Ann. And perhaps most wrong to file those stories from Santa Monica.

Not a day . . . week . . . season . . . planting cycle passes when I don't think about a travel piece I wrote about Vaalbos National Park, outside Harare, Zimbabwe, in which I failed to mention that the park posed a danger for travellers due to rampant kidnapping of foreign visitors. I also failed to mention that Vaalbos is in South Africa, not Zimbabwe. I also failed to actually go to either place, owing to prior commitments as well as to my general lack of interest in the African subcontinent. It is difficult to express the depth of my sympathy for the families of the Nova Scotia Always-Active Seniors Group.

I stand by my reporting of a 1989 piece in which I wrote that the Berlin Wall fell because of "structural damage." Despite the fact that that was a lie. I stand by both my reporting and the lie. And I apologize for both.

The story that perhaps did go too far was "My Interview with Jesus Christ." Parts of that story were untrue, though I did strike up a friendly correspondence with Mr. Christ, whom I now claim as a dear friend. Stop it. That's a lie. And a lie is a sin. Mr. Christ told me that.

It is difficult to say why I lied so often, though perhaps it has something to do with having seen my parents brutally murdered when I was nine years old by a deranged cleaning woman while my grandparents, brothers, sisters, and friends languished in a hospital, dying of cancer, leukemia, typhus, and mumps. Which is not what happened, and I am sorry for even typing those words, though I did like, just for a moment, the way they looked on the page and the effect they had on you. And on the Pulitzer committee. Sorry.

When the wall of lies finally did come crashing down around me, I remember thinking, Can I lie my way out? I know now that my reaction was a cry for help. And, in its own way, for a book contract. I have spent much time in the past few years in the care of a fine Viennese psychoanalyst and believe that I have got to the bottom of my mendacity, a word that the character Big Daddy uses in the play "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof," by Tennessee Williams. Who was my uncle.

Know this, my fellow-journalists: without honesty, there can be no trust. Even if the notes you fabricated were very, very convincing. ♦

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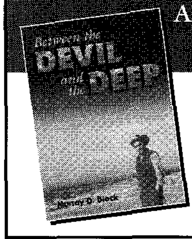

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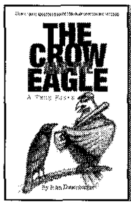

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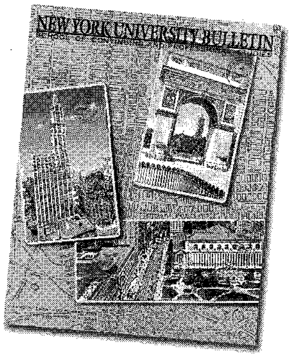

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A REPORTER AT LARGE

THE HEIGHT GAP

Why Europeans are getting taller and taller—and Americans aren't.

BY BURKHARD BILGER

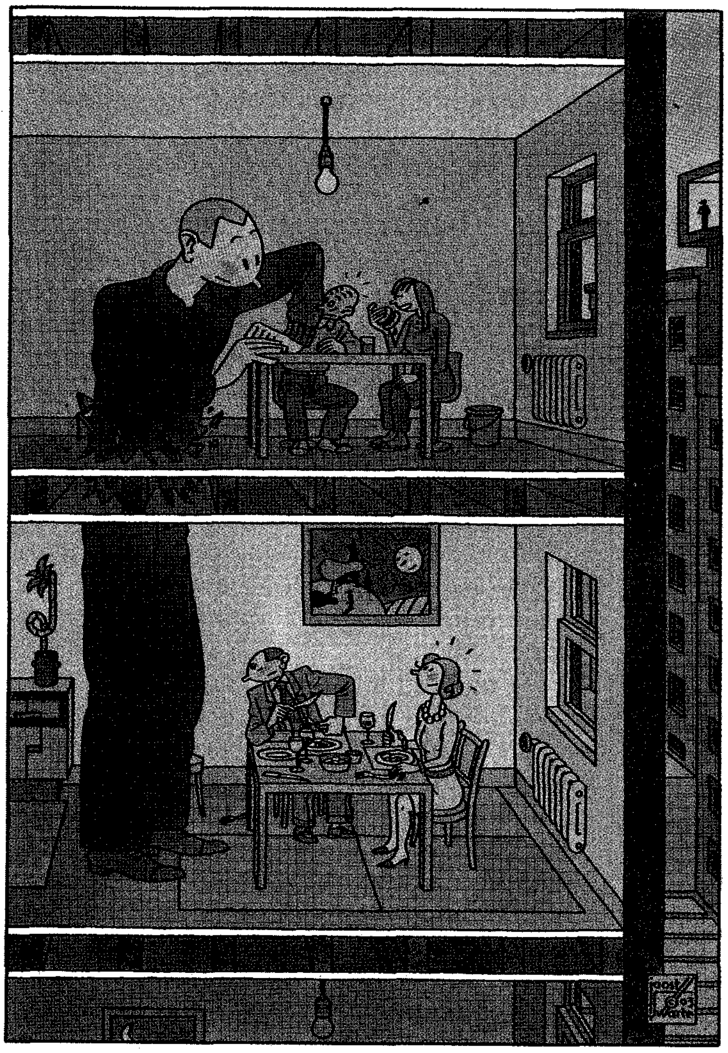
When Vincent van Gogh was thirty-one years old, in the fall of 1883, he travelled to the bleak moors of northern Holland and stayed at a tavern in the village of Stuifzand. The local countryside was hardly inhabited then—"Locus Deserta Atque ob Multos Paludes Invia," an old map called it: "A deserted and impenetrable place of many swamps"—but a few farmers and former convicts had managed to carve a living from it. They dug peat, brewed illegal gin, and placed poles across the marshes to navigate by. Any squatter who could keep his chimney smoking for a full year earned title to the land he cleared.

There is little record of what happened to van Gogh in Stuifzand—whether he got lost in the marshes or traded sketches for shots at the bar. When I visited the village, the locals mentioned him merely to illustrate an even greater national obsession: height. At the old tavern, which is now a private home, I was shown the tiny alcove where the painter probably slept. "It looks like it would fit only a child," J. W. Drukker, the current owner, told me. Then he and his wife, Joke (a common Dutch name, they explained, pronounced "Yoh-keh"), led me down the hall, to a sequence of pencil marks on a doorjamb. "My son, he is two metres," Joke told me, pointing to the topmost mark, six and a half feet from the floor. "His feet"—she held her hands about eighteen inches apart—"for water-skiing." Joke herself is six feet one, with blond tresses and shoulders like a Valkyrie. Drukker is six feet two.

The Netherlands, as any European can tell you, has become a land of giants. In a century's time, the Dutch have gone from being among the smallest people in Europe to the largest in the world. The men now average six feet one—seven inches taller than in van Gogh's day—and the women five feet eight. The national organization of tall people, Klub Lange Mensen, has considerable lobbying power. From Rotterdam to Eindhoven, ceilings have had to be lifted, furniture redesigned, lintels raised to keep foreheads from smacking them. Many hotels now offer twenty-centimetre bed extensions, and ambulances on occasion must keep their back doors open, to allow for patients' legs. "We will not go through the ceiling," the pediatrician Hans van Wieringen assured me, after summarizing national height surveys that he had coördinated. "But it is possible that we will grow another ten centimetres."

Walking along the canals of Amsterdam and Delft, I had an odd sensation of drowning—not because the crowds were so thick but because I couldn't lift my head above them. I'm five feet ten and a half—about an inch taller than the average in the United States—but, like most men I know, I tend to round the number up. Tall men, a series of studies has shown, benefit from a significant bias. They get married sooner, get promoted quicker, and earn higher wages. According to one recent study, the average six-foot worker earns a hundred and sixty-six thousand dollars more, over a thirty-year period, than his five-foot-five-inch counterpart—about eight hundred dollars more per inch per year. Short men are unlucky in politics (only five of forty-three Presidents have been shorter than average) and unluckier in love. A survey of some six thousand adolescents in the nineteen-sixties showed that the tallest boys were the first to get dates. The only ones more successful were those who got to choose their own clothes.

Like many biases, this one has a certain basis in fact. Over the past thirty years, a new breed of "anthropometric historians" has tracked how populations around the world have changed in stature. Height, they've concluded, is a kind of biological shorthand: a composite code for all the factors that make up a society's well-being. Height variations within a population are largely genetic, but height variations between populations are mostly environmental, anthropometric history suggests. If Joe is taller than Jack, it's probably because his parents are taller. But if the average Norwegian is taller than the average Nigerian it's because Norwegians live healthier lives. That's why the United Nations now uses height to monitor nutrition in developing countries. In our height lies the tale of our birth and upbringing, of our social class, daily diet, and health-care coverage. In our height lies our history.



Height is a kind of biological shorthand for a society's well-being.

JOOST SWARTE

I first heard of anthropometric history from John Komlos—the pope of the field, as one of his colleagues described him. Komlos, who is a professor at the University of Munich, has the look of an Old World tailor—sharp eyes, receding hairline, bottlebrush mustache—and the scholarly instincts of a born scavenger. For twenty years, he has rummaged through archives on both sides of the Atlantic, gathering hundreds of thousands of height records in search of trends that others may have missed.

In his way, Komlos was born to do such research. He stands five inches shy of six feet, and he blames much of the gap on history. His parents were Hungarian Jews who lived in Budapest during the Second World War. In 1944, when his mother was pregnant with him, the Nazis took control of the city and the Russians were poised for a counterattack. "The bombardment started almost simultaneously with my birth," Komlos told me. (His English is perfect, aside from a few oddly flattened vowels, but he speaks with an exaggerated drawl, as if he had learned the language by watching old Westerns.) His parents managed to get to a bombed-out hospital, using fake identity papers, and to take the baby back safely to the family hideout. But there was little food, and Komlos cried incessantly. One relative told his mother to throw the baby outside, since he wasn't going to make it anyway.

The Hungarian Communists took over the city in 1948, but Komlos's diet improved only slightly. During the war, his father, Herbert, had spent months in a Hungarian forced-labor battalion outside Stalingrad, returning on foot when the Russians broke the German siege, in the winter of 1943. After the war, Herbert Komlos was imprisoned again, this time by the Communists. "They trumped up some charges because they said he was middle-class," Komlos said. "He was working odd jobs at the time and had only a fourth-grade education." When the Hungarian revolution came, in 1956, Herbert supported it. A month later, when it failed, he packed up his family and fled for America.

Biologists say that we achieve our stature in three spurts: the first in infancy, the second between the ages of six and eight, the last in adolescence. Any decent diet can send us sprouting at these ages, but take away any one of forty-five or fifty essential nutrients and the body stops growing. ("Iodine deficiency alone can knock off ten centimetres and fifteen I.Q. points," one nutritionist told me.) Komlos was twelve years old when he left Hungary, and he had been malnourished most of his life. His first growth spurt had been cut short; his second was hardly more successful. But if heights have obsessed him over the last twenty years it's because of what happened next, in his adolescence.

When Komlos and his parents arrived in Chicago, in the winter of 1956, America was a land of almost mythical abundance. For more than two centuries, its people had been so healthy and so prosperous that they towered above the rest of the world—about four inches above the Dutch, for example, for most of the nineteenth century. To Komlos, raised on the black bread and thin broth of Communist Hungary, Chicago's all-you-can-eat restaurants were astonishing. "I was just amazed that these things existed," he says. But he found the restaurants not nearly as impressive as the giants who fed there.

There is a rueful tone to his nostalgia. His father arrived with no money, no English, and no marketable skills, Komlos says. For a year, he worked in a factory, making belts, for a dollar an hour. When it was clear that he would never be promoted, he quit and started his own business, making leather watchbands at home. In Hungary, there had always been a market for handmade goods, but Chicago stores were full of cheap imports. To compete with Hong Kong, Herbert Komlos had to work sixteen hours a day while his wife worked ten, and John put in twenty-five hours on the weekend. They ate better than in the old country, but only a little. "Everyone has a story like mine, if they were

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born with my religion in my part of the world," Komlos says. And those experiences are spelled out in their bodies.

Komlos now knows that he arrived in America at a pivotal point in its history. Over the next fifty years, by numerous indicators dear to economists, the country remained the richest in the world. But by another set of numbers—longevity, income inequality, and crime—it is now trailing Northern Europe and Japan. It's this shift that fascinates Komlos, and that emerges so vividly in his height data.

One evening last winter, Komlos and I were walking by the U.S.O. office at the Philadelphia airport, when he stopped to watch a batch of Coast Guard recruits who were shipping out to Cape May, New Jersey. "Look at that," he said. "Hardly any of them is six feet tall." Komlos had to catch an 8 P.M. red-eye to Munich, but he couldn't resist taking this group's measure. Standing at a discreet distance, he slowly sized up each man as if with a pair of calipers. "Amazing," he said. "The average German soldier is a hundred and seventy-nine centimetres—about five foot ten and a half. These guys are more like me."

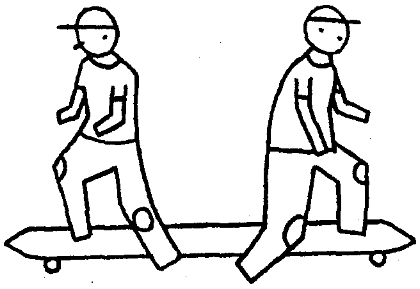
For centuries, he explained, governments have kept careful records of their soldiers' heights, providing a baseline against which modern populations are compared. (Records for women are much more scarce, but they tend to follow the same trends.) Looking down these rows of men, four abreast, Komlos could see the shadowy ranks of their ancestors lined up behind them, from West Point cadets and Citadel graduates to Union soldiers, Revolutionary War soldiers, and fighters in the French and Indian War.

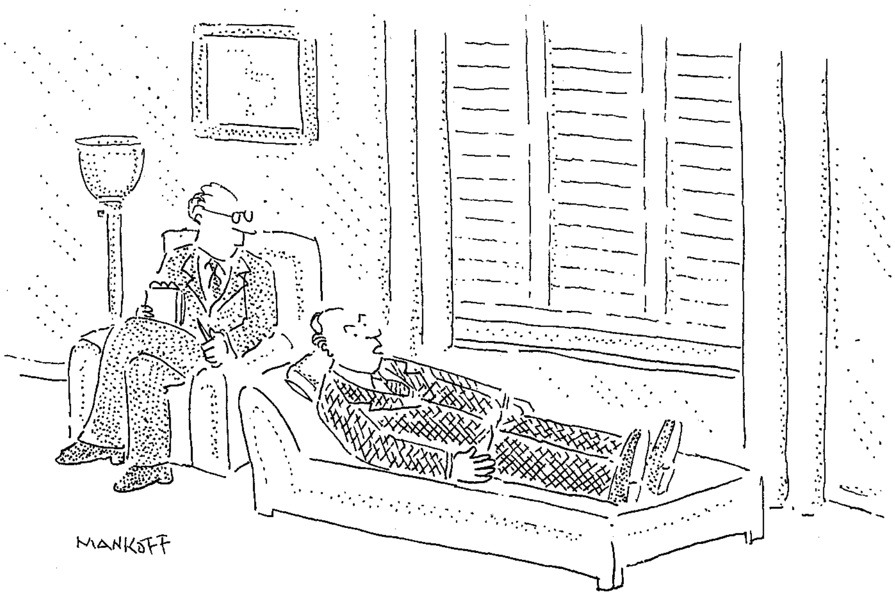
If you were to stretch a string from the head of the earliest soldier in that row to the head of the most recent recruit, you might expect it to trace an ascending line. Humans are an ever-improving species, the old evolution charts tell us; each generation is smarter, sleeker, and taller than the last. Yet in Northern Europe over the past twelve hundred years human stature has followed a U-shaped curve: from a high around 800 A.D., to a low sometime in the seventeenth century, and back up again. Charlemagne was well over six feet; the soldiers who stormed the Bastille a millennium later averaged five feet and weighed a hundred pounds. "They didn't look like Errol Flynn and Alan Hale," the economist Robert Fogel told me. "They looked like thirteen-year-old girls."

Fogel, who won the Nobel Prize in Economics in 1993, is the man most responsible for Komlos's interest in height. In the fall of 1982, when Komlos was working on a Ph.D. in economics at the University of Chicago (he had earlier earned a Ph.D. in history there), Fogel gave a lecture on stature that Komlos attended. Most historians, if they thought about height at all, tended to assume that it was tied to income. The more people earn, the better they eat; the better they eat, the taller they grow. "Men grow taller and faster the wealthier their country," the French hygienist and statistician Louis-René Villermé wrote in 1829. "In other words, misery . . . produces short people."

Fogel knew it wasn't that simple. In 1974, he and Stanley Engerman published an exhaustive study of slave economics entitled "Time on the Cross." Historians had long insisted that slavery was not only inhuman; it was bad business—hungry, brutalized workers made the poorest of farmers. Fogel and Engerman found nearly the opposite to be true: Southern plantations were almost thirty-five per cent more efficient than Northern farms, their analysis showed. Slavery was a cruel and inhuman system, but more so psychologically than physically: to get the most work from their slaves, planters fed and housed them nearly as well as free Northern farmers could feed and house themselves.

"Time on the Cross" was greeted with uncommon fury in academia—one reviewer consigned it "to the outermost ring of the scholar's hell." Yet each point that critics blew apart left a scattering of uncomfortable facts behind it. The most dramatic example came from a graduate student of Fogel's, Richard Steckel, who is now at Ohio State. Steckel decided to verify his mentor's claims by looking





“Well, I finally got in touch with my sexuality—it’s disgusting.”

at the slaves’ body measurements. He went through more than ten thousand slave manifests—shipboard records kept by traders in the colonies—until he had the heights of some fifty thousand slaves; then he averaged them out by age and sex. The results were startling: adult slaves, Steckel found, were nearly as tall as free whites, and three to five inches taller than the average Africans of the time.

The height study both redeemed and rebuked “Time on the Cross.” Although the adult slaves were clearly well fed, the children were extremely small and malnourished. (To eat, apparently, they had to be old enough to work.) But Fogel was more than willing to stand corrected. This wasn’t just another data set, he realized. Height records offered a new angle on history, and they were readily available. Measurements of French military conscripts date back to 1716, and anthropologists have collected much older skeletal measurements. “There are millions of these data lying around and nobody is looking at them,” Komlos remembers Fogel suggesting at the lecture. All that was needed was a few good graduate students to gather them up.

“It sounded hopeless,” Komlos told me. “To study the history of human height with no funding and no real support in the field. It sounded *very* hopeless.” Anthropometric historians need tens of thousands of measurements to gauge height trends—enough to factor out the effects of age, sex, and, above all, DNA. Finding and tabulating those heights requires grants, research assistants, and—ideally—tenure. Yet to most economists the whole endeavor sounded suspiciously like quackery, if not something worse: phrenologists and Nazi scientists, too, had laid great store in body measurements.

“There were belly laughs at first,” Richard Steckel remembers. “The economists hadn’t worked in developing countries and they hadn’t studied the historical data on height. Most of them came from privileged backgrounds, where most differences in height are genetic. So the knee-jerk reaction was ‘This is ridiculous. It’s a monumental waste of resources.’ ” Among some social scientists, height research was well established. In the early nineteen-fifties, Nevin Scrimshaw, who set up the International Nutrition Foundation, in Boston, had studied child development throughout the Third World. Every bout of diarrhea or measles, he found, can bump a child off his growth curve. Every period of good nutrition can nudge him back on track. Most economists and historians ignored these short-term trends, however, while public-health workers ignored the long term. “And the two sides didn’t talk to each other,” Steckel says.

Anthropometric history was largely a field of two in those years: Steckel and Komlos, with other graduate students conducting studies here and there and Fogel orchestrating from the wings. Steckel, after his work on slaves, went on to Union soldiers and Native Americans. (The men of the northern Cheyenne, he found, were the tallest people in the world in the late nineteenth century: well nourished on bison and berries, and wandering clear of disease on the high plains, they averaged nearly five feet ten.) Then he enlisted anthropologists to gather bone measurements dating back ten thousand years. In both Europe and the Americas, he discovered, humans grew shorter as their cities grew larger. The more people clustered together, the more pest-ridden and poorly fed they became. Heights also fell in synch with global temperatures, which reached a nadir during the Little Ice Age of the seventeenth century.

While Steckel worked backward in time, Komlos worked forward, tracing American and European heights from the seventeenth century on. He was a “modern-day gypsy” at first, he says, moving from archive to archive without tenure or steady funding, wheedling librarians and hiring indifferent research assistants. At the University of Vienna, he tabulated the heights of a hundred and forty thousand Austrian soldiers and their children. At the National Archives in Washington, he studied forty-one hundred and eighty West Point graduates. For thirteen years, he gathered and analyzed the heights of thirty-eight thousand French soldiers from the late seventeen-hundreds. Peasant conscripts were nearly three inches shorter than their well-bred officers—reason enough for a revolution.

“See this?” Komlos said one afternoon, sliding a sheet of paper toward me. “This one graph took me nine years.” We were sitting at his desk at the University of Munich, following his results from century to century and from continent to continent. To either side of us, floor-to-ceiling bookshelves held bound volumes of statistics. High curtainless windows looked out on the triumphal arch of the Siegestor and flooded the room in pale golden light.

It was an odd setting, Komlos admitted, for a Jewish scholar who once nearly starved under the Nazis, but hardly unpleasant. Economic historians with his training are a rarity in Germany, and much valued. As a full professor, Komlos has the equivalent of an endowed chair, with state-sponsored grants for his research. He teaches his courses in English, sends his two sons to an international school, and edits his field's only journal, *Economics and Human Biology*, also in English. "We live in a little American enclave," his wife, Lillian, told me. But they depend on Europe for their livelihood.

The graph in question showed the heights of American slaves, servants, soldiers, and apprentices in the early seventeen-hundreds. To produce it, Komlos searched through Colonial newspapers for descriptions of runaways and deserters, until he had gathered ten thousand seven hundred and forty-two heights. "You can drown in these data," he said. "But they also allow you to get closer to these guys." He showed me an ad from the Pennsylvania *Gazette*, dated September 26, 1771. An Irish servant named Nathaniel Anster had run away for the third time. He was thirty years old, with a sandy complexion and short bushy hair. He had on a felt hat and a striped blanket coat, was "much inclined to strong drink," and had "a natural propensity to steal." He was also five feet seven inches tall. When Komlos had gathered enough heights, he averaged them out and plotted them on this graph.

The immediate point was clear: America was a good place to live in the eighteenth century. Game was abundant, land free for the clearing, settlement sparse enough to prevent epidemics. On Komlos's graph, even the runaway slaves are five feet eight, and white colonists are five feet nine—a full three inches taller than the average European of the time. "So this is the eighteenth century," Komlos said, slapping the files. "This is not problematic. It shows that Americans are well nourished. Terrific." He reached into a cardboard folder and pulled out another series of graphs. "What is problematic is what comes next."

Around the time of the Civil War, Americans' heights predictably decreased: Union soldiers dropped from sixty-eight to sixty-seven inches in the mid-eighteen-hundreds, and similar patterns held for West Point cadets, Amherst students, and free blacks in Maryland and Virginia. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, the country seemed set to regain its eminence. The economy was expanding at a dramatic rate, and public-hygiene campaigns were sweeping the cities clean at last: for the first time in American history, urbanites began to outgrow farmers.

Then something strange happened. While heights in Europe continued to climb, Komlos said, "the U.S. just went flat." In the First World War, the average American soldier was still two inches taller than the average German. But sometime around 1955 the situation began to reverse. The Germans and other Europeans went on to grow an extra two centimetres a decade, and some Asian populations several times more, yet Americans haven't grown taller in fifty years. By now, even the Japanese—once the shortest industrialized people on earth—have nearly caught up with us, and Northern Europeans are three inches taller and rising.

The average American man is only five feet nine and a half—less than an inch taller than the average soldier during the Revolutionary War. Women, meanwhile, seem to be getting smaller. According to the National Center for Health Statistics—which conducts periodic surveys of as many as thirty-five thousand Americans—women born in the late nineteen-fifties and early nineteen-sixties average just under five feet five. Those born a decade later are a third of an inch shorter.

Just in case I still thought this a trivial trend, Komlos put a final bar graph in front of me. It was entitled "Life Expectancy 2000." Compared with people in thirty-six other industrialized countries, it showed, Americans rank twenty-eighth in average longevity—just above the Irish and the Cypriots (the Japanese top the rankings). "Ask yourself this," Komlos said, peering at me above his reading glasses. "What is the difference between Western Europe and the U.S. that would work in this direction? It's not income, since Americans, at least on paper, have been wealthier for more than a century. So what is it?"

"Is anyone using this rock?"

The obvious answer would seem to be immigration. The more Mexicans and Chinese there are in the United States, the shorter the American population becomes. But the height statistics that Komlos cites include only native-born Americans who speak English at home, and he is careful to screen out people of Asian and Hispanic descent. In any case, according to Richard Steckel, who has also analyzed American heights, the United States takes in too few immigrants to account for the disparity with Northern Europe.

In the nineteenth century, when Americans were the tallest people in the world, the country took in floods of immigrants. And those Europeans, too, were small compared with native-born

Americans. Malnourishment in a mother can cause a child not to grow as tall as it would otherwise. But after three generations or so the immigrants catch up. Around the world, well-fed children differ in height by less than half an inch. In a few, rare cases, an entire people may share the same growth disorder. African Pygmies, for instance, produce too few growth hormones and the proteins that bind them to tissues, so they can’t break five feet even on the best of diets. By and large, though, any population can grow as tall as any other.

This last point may sound counterintuitive. Height, like skin color, seems to vary with geography: we think of squat Peruvians, slender Masai, stocky Inuit, and lanky Brazilians. According to Bergmann’s Rule and Allen’s Rule, animals in cold climates tend to have larger bodies and shorter limbs than those in warm climates. But though climate still shapes musk oxen and giraffes—and a willowy Inuit is hard to find—its effect on industrialized people has almost disappeared. Swedes ought to be short and stocky, yet they’ve had good clothing and shelter for so long that they’re some of the tallest people in the world. Mexicans ought to be tall and slender. Yet they’re so often stunted by poor diet and diseases that we assume they were born to be small.

In the early nineteen-seventies, when the anthropologist Barry Bogin first visited Guatemala, the country’s two main ethnic groups seemed to live on different social planes. The Ladinos, who claimed primarily Spanish ancestry, were of average height. The Maya Indians were so short that some scholars called them the pygmies of Central America: the men averaged only five feet two, the women four feet eight. The Ladinos and the Maya shared the same small country, so their differences were assumed to be genetic. But when Bogin, who now teaches at the University of Michigan, began taking measurements he soon found another cause. “There was an undeclared war going on,” he says. The Ladinos, who controlled the government, had systematically forced the Maya into poverty. Whether they lived in the city or in the countryside, the Maya had less food and medicine, and they had much higher rates of disease.

A decade and a half later, after civil war had erupted and up to a million Guatemalans had fled to the United States, Bogin took another series of measurements. This time, his subjects were Mayan refugees, between six and twelve years old, in Florida and Los Angeles. “Lo and behold, they were much taller than the Maya in Guatemala,” Bogin says. By 2000, the American Maya were four inches taller than Guatemalan Maya of the same age, and about as tall as Guatemalan Ladinos. “As far as I know, it’s the biggest increase of its kind ever measured,” Bogin says. “It shows that they weren’t genetically small. They weren’t pygmies. They were suffering.”

Much the same transformation has occurred in the Mexican-American population. Since the nineteen-twenties, the median height of Mexican-American teen-agers has nearly reached the United States’ norm. It’s that norm, and not the immigrants, that has failed to rise.

If there is an answer to the riddle of American height, it probably lies in Holland, where everyone has a theory about stature. When I spoke to Hans van Wieringen, the pediatrician, he credited his people’s growth to child care: the Dutch have the world’s best prenatal and postpartum clinics, free for every citizen. Others pointed to the landscape (flatlanders are naturally tall, they said, just as mountain people are naturally short), to the Calvinist religion (Protestants are taller than Catholics because their families have fewer mouths to feed), or to the Dutch love of milk (a study in Bavaria found a direct correlation between height and the number of cows per capita). The Dutch are taller than the Italians, one man suggested, because they go to bed at a reasonable hour.

The most convincing argument was one made by J. W. Drukker, the owner of the old inn at Stuifzand where van Gogh had stayed. Drukker is a professor of economic history at the University of Groningen, and he has made his own study of Dutch height. He looks like an oversized Phil Donahue, with shaggy white locks and wide-rimmed glasses, but he has a more worldly air. His office is hung with mildly erotic prints, and he wears paste-on fingernails on his right hand, for playing classical guitar. “A nineteenth-century virtuoso couldn’t have played this instrument,” he told me,

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pointing to the guitar leaning against his desk, beside a sheaf of études. "His hands would have been too small."

Drukker's research on stature began as something of a boondoggle. In the late nineteen-seventies, when Dutch universities were particularly well funded, he had the luxury of two student assistants. "Sometimes they had nothing to do," he remembers. "So we thought, This is weird, we can reconstruct the heights of soldiers and correlate them with income. We love it." Over the next few months, he put his assistants to work gathering heights from 1800 to 1950, then plotting them on a graph. In the end, the curve they produced took so much work that one of the students gave it the acronym YASSIS—Dutch for "yuck." But the results were striking.

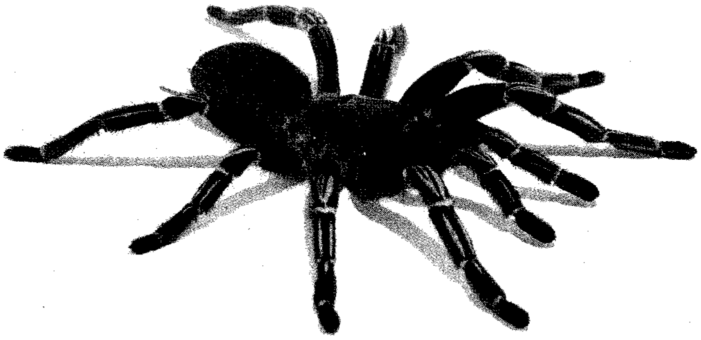
Holland's growth spurt began only in the mid-eighteen-hundreds, Drukker found, when its first liberal democracy was established. Before 1850, the country grew rich off its colonies, but the wealth stayed in the hands of the wealthy, and the average citizen shrank. After 1850, height and income suddenly fell into lockstep: when incomes went up, heights went up (after a predictable lag time), and always to the same degree. "I thought I must have made an error," Drukker said. "I must have correlated one of the variables with itself." He hadn't. Holland, like the rest of Northern Europe, had simply managed to spread its prosperity around. These days, Dutch heights no longer keep pace with the economy. ("We can't grow to four metres just because our income quadruples," Drukker says.) But the essential equation is the same: when the G.N.P. grows, everyone grows.

As America's rich and poor drift further apart, its growth curve may be headed in the opposite direction, Komlos and others say. The eight million Americans without a job, the forty million without health insurance, the thirty-five million who live below the poverty line are surely having trouble measuring up. And they're not alone. As more and more Americans turn to a fast-food diet, its effects may be creeping up the social ladder, so that even the wealthy are growing wider rather than taller. "I've seen a similar thing in Guatemala," Bogin says. "The rich kids are taken care of by poor maids, so they catch the same diseases. When they go out on the street, they eat the same street food. They may get antibiotics, but they're still going to get exposed."

Steckel has found that Americans lose the most height to Northern Europeans in infancy and adolescence, which implicates pre- and post-natal care and teenage eating habits. "If these snack foods are crowding out fruits and vegetables, then we may not be getting the micronutrients we need," he says. In a recent British study, one group of schoolchildren was given hamburgers, French fries, and other familiar lunch foods; the other was fed nineteen-forties-style wartime rations such as boiled cabbage and corned beef. Within eight weeks, the children on the rations were both taller and slimmer than the ones on a regular diet.

Inequality may be at the root of Amer-

{ *Oh, what an untangled web of opportunity we weave.* }



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ica's height problem, but it's too soon to be certain. If the poor are pulling all of us down with them, some economists say, why didn't Americans shoot up after the war on poverty, in the nineteen-sixties? Komlos isn't sure. But recently he has scoured his data for people who've bucked the national trend. He has subdivided the country's heights by race, sex, income, and education. He has looked at whites alone, at blacks alone, at people with advanced degrees and those in the highest income bracket. Somewhere in the United States, he thinks, there must be a group that's both so privileged and so socially insulated that it's growing taller. He has yet to find one.

"The best measure of a just society is whether you'd be willing to be thrown into it at random," Komlos told me one day over lunch at an Italian restaurant in Munich. He was paraphrasing the American philosopher John Rawls. The United States earns mixed marks by that standard, he said. The country still gives refugees like his family a home, but it also leaves them stranded. His father spent ten years making watchbands at sweatshop wages and was no better off than before. In Hungary, at least, there had been companionship in poverty. In America, his family was surrounded by wealth.

Yet his father's story, like that of the Maya in Florida, had a second act. Herbert Komlos eventually figured out the American system. He borrowed two thousand dollars from a friend, opened a storefront in Logan Square, and began importing watchbands from Hong Kong. Within ten years, he had saved enough money to move to a house off Lakeshore Drive. By the time he died, last winter, at the age of eighty-six, he was living in a condominium near Palm Beach.

"There were twenty-five thousand of us Hungarian refugees, and not one of them I knew didn't make it," Komlos told me. "Not one of us didn't aspire to and reach the middle class. This was the generation of George Soros. This was the generation of the guy who founded Intel. I had cousins and second cousins—everybody became lawyers, accountants, professors." He'd been back to Chicago recently, he said, and the poverty and urban decay had come as a shock after Germany's tidy inner cities. "But, if you look at the Turks in Germany or the Algerians in France, there aren't that many who can advance up the social ladder." He shrugged. "America is still a land of opportunity."

The last time I saw him, we were in downtown Munich. The sun was out and shoppers thronged the Marienplatz, sporting midwinter tans from Majorca and the Canary Islands. As Komlos headed for the subway, I watched the crowd sweep over him until only the top of his head was visible, bobbing contentedly beneath the tide. I remembered a joke he'd made earlier, when I'd mentioned that my parents are immigrants, too: "If they'd stayed in Europe, you might be four centimetres taller." Then I squared my shoulders and waded in behind him. ♦

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PROFILES

ESCAPING THE MATRIX

Laurence Fishburne on the streets of Brooklyn, in a Philippine jungle, and on a stage of his own.

BY JOHN LAHR

In the history of drama, many plays have been published with an author's note, but Laurence Fishburne's "Riff Raff" is the only one, to my knowledge, that comes with a warning. "Practitioners of the craft, be forewarned," he writes in the 1997 acting edition. "DON'T FUCK AROUND! COME CORRECT, COME TO GET DOWN. A 'RIFF' IS A 'RIFF.' SO SWING!"

"Swing" is Fishburne's favorite word to describe the nuanced and dynamic force that he brings to his performances. "I mean it in the exact sense that jazz musicians mean it," he explains. " 'Don't mean a thing if it ain't got no swing.' It's got to have a feel, a rhythm, a sense of melody and tempo." In nearly fifty films, Fishburne, with his broad-shouldered swagger, his heavy-lidded almond eyes, and his smoky, wet voice, has made his own eloquent music, swooping between registers of sorrow and joy. "There is hardly an actor of his age around who exhibits more flash, energy, and intelligence," David Thomson writes in "The New Biographical Dictionary of Film." Acting, to Fishburne, means "being fearless—it's throwing yourself off the bridge." He goes on, "Sometimes it's not appropriate; sometimes it may be wrong. But it's gonna be O.K. You're gonna arrive at something that's true. You're gonna fly. You're gonna catch the right fucking updraft, man, and you're gonna go, 'Oh, oh, yes!—this is what I was trying to do.' "

The unjudgmental surrender with which Fishburne applies himself to his roles has produced a collection of riveting character studies—from the callow cannon fodder Clean in "Apocalypse Now" (1979) to the blood-curdling hip-hop killer Jimmy Jump in "King of New York" (1990), the embattled father Furious Styles in "Boyz N the Hood" (1991), the obsessive, abusive Ike Turner in "What's Love Got to Do with It" (1993), and the perp turned man of principle Socrates Fortlow in "Always Outnumbered" (1998). All of these portraits find the epic in the ordinary; they exhibit Fishburne's signature dash and danger. In other words, they swing.

Fishburne's friend Arthur Mendoza, an acting coach who runs the Actors Circle Theatre, in Los Angeles, complains that "swing" is not a strategy for all actors. It's unhelpful, he argues, to tell "broken, emotionally unavailable actors to just let go and fly by the seat of their pants." It works for Fishburne, he explains, because of the "electric current of talent passing through him." He goes on, "He's a chameleon of body, voice, and movement. He'll walk one way with me in West Hollywood at eleven-thirty at night. He'll walk a different way down Madison Avenue in New York. He is so absorbed in his circumstances and his environment. His ear is attuned. His body is attuned. He can mimic and change."

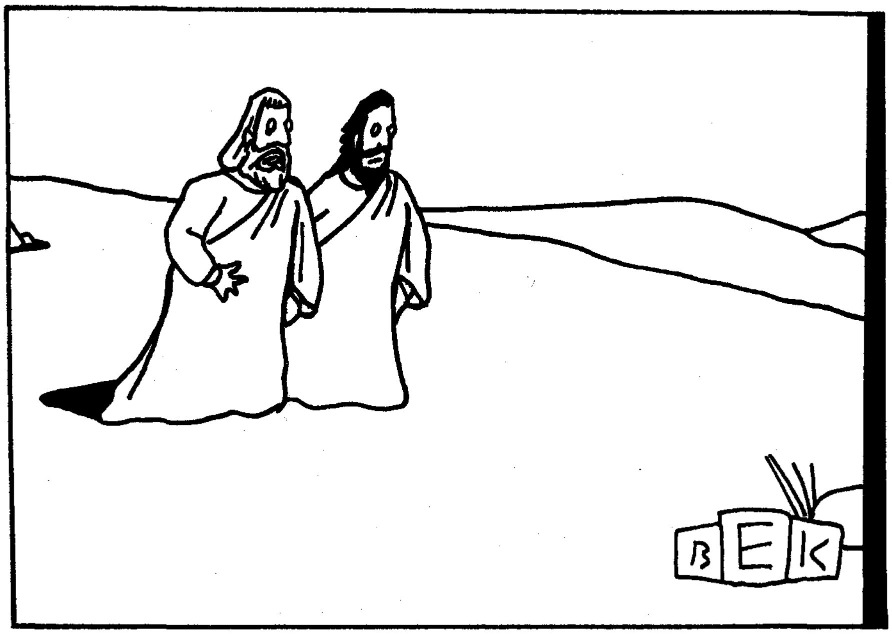
Fishburne's improvisational skills were demonstrated at our first meeting, in New York, last October. At Brasserie 8½, a cavernous midtown restaurant on West Fifty-seventh Street, he bounded down the circular stairway in a green-and-yellow baseball cap and a sweatsuit, carrying what looked like a gym bag. But the most noticeable thing he brought into the buzzing room was his own specific gravity. Although Fishburne's bearing is statuesque, he is not conventionally handsome. His skin is pitted; the gap between his teeth reads like an exclamation point to every smile or scowl. His forehead is broad, and his cheekbones are high, drawing attention to his eyes, which are alternately brooding and twinkling. The defining quality in Fishburne's demeanor—and his performances—is stillness, a trick he says he learned from watching Clark Gable. His ability to meet the world without noise sharpens both his focus and the power of his presence. This aura of command makes it natural for Fishburne to play both kings and killers. (He was the first African-American to play Othello onscreen.) "He comes to the floor with a character and a dignity—quite the opposite of self-importance," says Sidney Poitier, another model of reserve, who is one of Fishburne's mentors.

At the restaurant, when I mentioned that the happy hour was perhaps a little too happy for us to be able to tape our conversation, Fishburne immediately motioned to me to follow him. I did—up the stairs, through a scrum of pedestrians, and across Fifty-seventh Street, where he stopped at the curb. "How do you feel about motorcycles?" he asked me, eying a gray BMW K1100 GT beside us. "A little scared," I said. He straddled the bike. "Just swing your leg over," he said. I did as I was told, and that was how I found myself, without a helmet, clinging to Fishburne's love handles as we pushed out into the mayhem of Manhattan rush-hour traffic. "Don't worry," he said, as a bus menaced us. "I've had Frank Gehry on the back."

Fishburne learned to ride in 1995, for the action comedy "Fled," and he starred last year in the best-forgotten Western-on-wheels "Biker Boyz." He now owns five motorcycles. Last summer, he took a three-day trip from Miami to Key West and back, and went on a five-day journey from Munich to Milan with the Guggenheim Motorcycle Club—a group of high rollers who enjoy playing low riders, among them Jeremy Irons, Dennis Hopper, and Thomas Krens, the director of the Guggenheim. It's not the speed of a motorcycle that Fishburne finds seductive but the freedom it offers. "It has to do with being able to move around under one's own steam," he said. "There are no minders, no assistants, no friends, no girlfriends. I don't have to talk to anybody; I have to make sure I survive!"

CORBIS SABA

Fishburne with his dog, Bingo, in Hollywood Hills, December, 2003. Photograph by Martin Schoeller.



"Being around Jesus brings out all my apostle issues."

He added, "This is how I gather stuff for myself."

Fishburne, who has been a professional actor for thirty-two of his forty-two years, is, thanks to his role as Morpheus in "The Matrix" trilogy, one of the most widely recognized actors in America. But with the visor of his helmet pulled down he becomes miraculously anonymous and free to observe. "I can stop on the bike and sit and watch people on the corner having coffee, having a conversation, having an argument," he said. He calls this a form of hunting and gathering—"the best sort of teaching." Riding also fulfills another of his needs. "I get to be a child when I'm on my motorcycle," he said. "Having a career as a child and having a childhood are in direct opposition. You don't get to be a child when you're working."

Fishburne likes to say that the stage chose him when he was ten. But his performing self was dreamed up long before, by his mother, Hattie, whom he describes as "a sassy brown woman with a brilliant mind and a razorlike tongue." Hattie Fishburne, who holds an M.A. in science education from Columbia Teachers College, was raised in Augusta, Georgia, the precocious third of her mother's eight daughters, all college-educated, and the only one to venture North. Her father, Jesse Crawford, who died when she was two, was a go-getter who managed a couple of businesses and whose "chutzpah" Hattie claims to have inherited. She felt short-changed, however, by her mother, Classie Anderson, who died in 1997, at the age of ninety-two. "For whatever reason, Mama could not embrace me," she says. "I always heard a different drummer. I heard a different whole band." Classie, who got by on Social Security and her own tenacity, was a strict disciplinarian. Her house was run on a rigid routine—dinner at four, lights out by ten or so. Hattie was a college student before she ever visited a friend's house. She played the piano, sang in a choir, read voraciously, and loved to dance, but she found no support at home for her artistic passions. "We were in the Deep South, in the Bible Belt," she says. "We didn't know that you could make a living writing or acting or singing. You had to have a real nine-to-five job and make a paycheck every week. I have always wanted to be a writer. I would have liked to be a singer. But there was no opportunity for me to do that."

In 1959, Hattie went to New York to visit Laurence Fishburne, Jr., a man she'd met a few years earlier at a U.S.O. function. They decided to marry, and, in the summer of 1960, she embarked for New York to enroll in graduate school at Columbia and begin her life with a sometime taxi-driver and gas-station attendant who later became a corrections officer. "She wasn't city-wise," Laurence Fishburne, Jr., who answers to the name Papa Fish, says of Hattie. "She was under the impression that in New York City the street was paved with gold. She wanted to have a mink coat and a maid." In the winter of 1960, Hattie became pregnant, and she returned to Augusta. "I knew that the marriage was over," she says. "He had no ambition." All her drive, resourcefulness, and longing came to rest, instead, on her son. "When Laurence was born," she says, "I looked at him and I said, 'We're gonna make it together.' "

By the time Fishburne was three or four, he and Hattie had moved back to New York, to a third-floor apartment in Park Slope, Brooklyn. "Me and Hattie had a great amount of fun," Fishburne says of his childhood. But if Hattie was Fishburne's caretaker—occasionally taking him to judo, theatre, and music lessons—he was increasingly vested with the unwanted responsibility of being hers. There were "men moving through the house all the time," Fishburne says, but he was the one who remained stalwart, listening to his mother's litany of grievances, bringing her coffee in the morning, zipping up her dresses for dates, and fetching the pills that she said were for her thyroid but which he now suspects were uppers and downers to control her frequent mood swings.

Fishburne learned to perform literally at his mother's knee, where, according to the photographer James Graham, who has been Fishburne's best friend since childhood, he embodied a whole repertory of supporting characters—"the houseboy, the servant, the trophy son, and the bad boy" among them. "I was seen only when I was being who she wanted me to be," Fishburne explains. His uncanny sensitivity—"He's like an open nerve that absorbs," Mendoza says—is due in part to his vigilance over Hattie's stormy emotional landscape. "When I walked into that home, I didn't know who I was gonna get," he says. "I didn't know if I was gonna get the woman who was really elated or really rageful." (Hattie once knocked out the female principal of the junior high school where she taught science.) One reliable antidepressant was to sing to her; she could always be resuscitated by her son's rendition of "Candy Man." But, until Fishburne discovered acting, his home life was fractious. "They used to fight," Fishburne's godfather, Maurice A. Watson, who is a professor of oral communication at Brooklyn College, says. "I mean, tug of war. I would say, 'Why y'all carry on like this? He's a child and you're a grown woman and why are y'all screaming at each other and calling names?' "

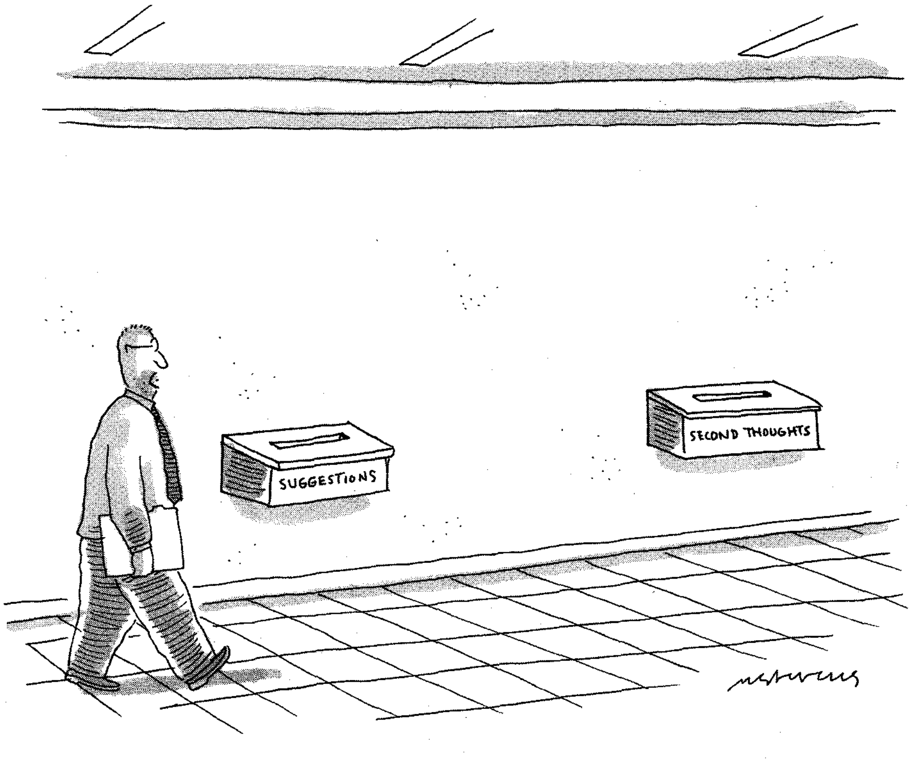
When Fishburne was about seven, Hattie, to supplement her income, set up a charm school in their apartment. One living-room wall was fitted with a ballet bar, the other with a full-length mirror. When Fishburne dressed for school, she says, "he had to look at himself in the mirror from head to foot, stand before the mirror to be sure all of his clothes were fitting right." The mirror served Fishburne the way it served Hattie's pupils: it made him forcibly aware of what he was presenting to the world. In front of it, Fishburne practiced his Pledge of Allegiance. For up to two minutes at a time, at his mother's insistence, he also looked himself straight in the eye. "She would say to me, 'I just want to make sure that when you are grown you will never encounter a white man and look down,' " Fishburne says.

"In the first grade, he had already established himself as the alpha male of the class," Graham recalls. "He could do incredible imitations of everybody. His vocal abilities were stunning." By the time he progressed from P.S. 321 to I.S. 88, Fishburne had won local celebrity as a regular on "One Life to Live," the first integrated network soap opera. He attributes his early success largely to Watson, who was involved with a semi-professional theatre group called the Afro-American Theatre Workshop. In third grade, Fishburne won the lead in a class production of "Peter Pan," and Hattie asked Watson to accompany her to the show. "She was ambitious for him," Watson remembers, and she wanted to know if he was talented. During the performance, Watson whispered to Hattie, "He's really quite good." Until then, Hattie had wanted her son to be a doctor; now she began to envision an acting career. In New York in the late sixties, there was a renaissance in black theatre—the Negro Ensemble Company, the New Lafayette Theatre, and the Public Theatre needed African-American child actors. Fishburne remembers refusing his mother's request that he audition for the musical "The Me Nobody Knows." "She came back to me a few weeks later and said, 'If you'd gotten the job, you'd make three hundred dollars a week,' " he recalls. "I looked at her and said, 'Well, why didn't you tell me that then?' "

Sometime later, Fishburne got his chance. Watson had been asked to appear in the New Federal Theatre production of Charles Fuller's play "In My Many Names and Days," which was about Jackie Robinson; he suggested that Fishburne audition for the part of young Jackie. "I brought him, he read, he was a natural," Watson says. "Controversy developed. He wasn't black enough." Hattie, who for years oversaw her son's finances and career, proposed that they solve the problem by putting shoe polish on her son. "I did my first performance in blackface," Fishburne recalls. On opening night, Watson says, "he was outstanding." Afterward, Fishburne found Watson. "It felt good, man," he said. Although he couldn't put it into words until years later, what excited Fishburne about his début experience was not the sense of triumph it gave him but the sense of safety. The stage was a boundary that Hattie could not cross. "She couldn't get in there," Fishburne says. "It was my safe place, where I was in control of who I was and what I was gonna be." With his mother, Fishburne was emotionally under wraps. Onstage, he discovered, he could express what was inside him. "I felt it was a homecoming," he says.

On Halloween of last year, Fishburne and I drove to his former stomping ground in Brooklyn, in the black Mercedes 600S that he gave his father in 2002. "My father needed to feel acknowledged in some small way by me," Fishburne said. "I know when my old man drives around in this car and people see him in it they go, 'Wow, man, nice car.' I know my old man's, like, 'Yeah, my son bought that for me.' " He added, "I always wanted to go, 'Hey, Dad, can I borrow the car?' So today I borrowed the car for the first time."

Papa Fish lives in the Bronx. When his son was growing up, he claims, he visited him every weekend. Fishburne puts those visits at once a month. Their main activity together—a barometer of the uneasy distance between them—was moviegoing; often, they'd see two or three movies in a day. "I don't really

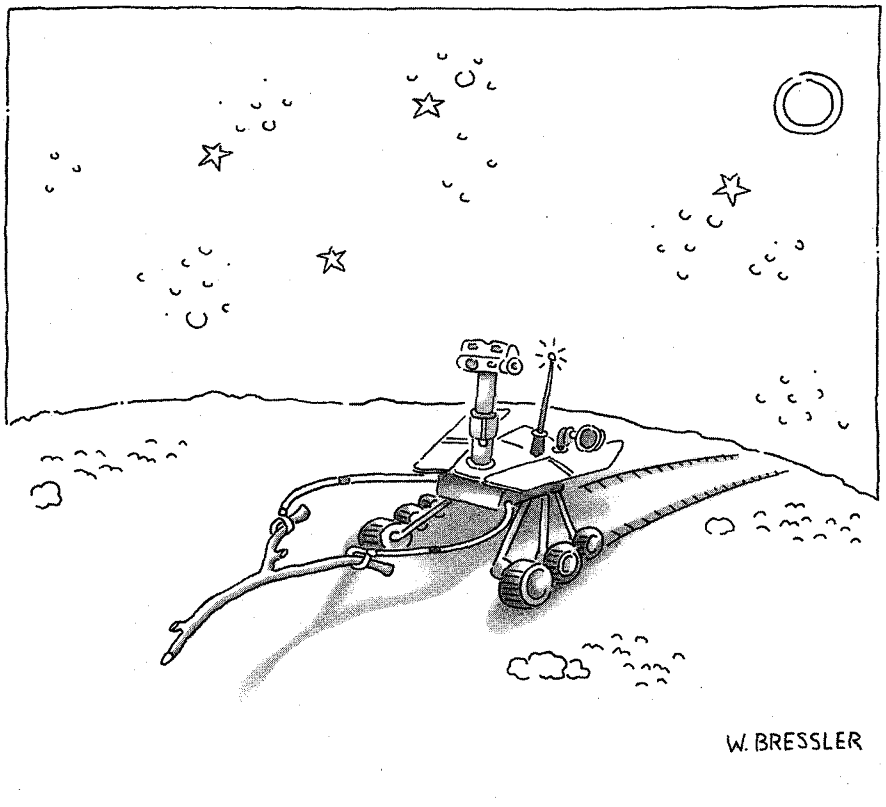


know my father that well," Fishburne says. "He has a really explosive personality. Very gregarious, very powerful. He's a funny cat. But I didn't need him to be funny. I needed him to be tender and gentle with me. He didn't know how to do that." As kids, Fishburne and Graham nicknamed him Idi Amin. "He was a man of few words," Graham says. "He was there just to put Fish in check. . . . There was no argument, no negotiation."

"Here it is!" Fishburne said, as the pavilion at the edge of Prospect Park came into view. "This is where my life starts—Grand Army Plaza, baby." Fishburne grew up on Fiske Place, between Seventh and Eighth Avenues, in the mid-sixties, when the neighborhood streets were filled with the polyglot din of first-generation Americans. "That's my base," he said, "the place I've always operated from as a human being. . . . It gave me an appreciation of different peoples and different cultures, man." When Fishburne was a boy, the notorious Puerto Rican gang the Brooklyn Homicides infiltrated the neighborhood. "On the other side of Thirteenth, there were gangs; on the other side of Seventh, there were gangs; on the other side of Fifth, there were gangs," he said. "White boys did not go across Seventh Avenue when I was a child because the whole block was Puerto Rican. I could cross the street because I was brown."

In Park Slope, Fishburne learned what he calls his "cool thing"—the posture of the street tough. Even as a boy, he was standing on corners with candy cigarettes dangling from his mouth, pretending to be "bad." On the basketball courts of P.S. 321, he became expert at standing up to older bullies by imitating their menace. "I would shut them down and put them off," he says. "I didn't find out until I was grown that they thought I was, like, some gang leader." As we drove, the neighborhood evoked stories from the old days. The bottom-feeders whose botched drug hustle is the premise of his play "Riff Raff"—Freddy Nine Lives, Tony the Tiger, Torch—were all based on Brooklyn figures "who didn't make it out." Fishburne's haphazard roll call—Tommy Costello, Mike Vigilante, Betty and Amos Saunders, Dave Rangelli—conjured up the gallimaufry of Americans whose lives and behavior he still draws on in his work. When Graham saw last year's "Mystic River," in which Fishburne plays a detective called Whitey Powers, he recognized in the characterization "a guy on our block—Whitey Higgins, a big bushy Irishman with a shock of white hair." He said, "I was seeing Whitey Higgins's voice come out of Laurence's head, and all his mannerisms. The guy channelled Whitey Higgins."

The landscape of Fishburne's Brooklyn youth has been refurbished over the years. Snooky's Pub is now Snooky's Fine Food and Spirits; Danny's Candy Store, where Fishburne stole comic books, is now a sushi bar; Greasy Jack's, the soda fountain, is a Starbucks. At a stoplight, Fishburne leaned his broad frame over the steering wheel and sighed. "You can't go home again," he said. A construction worker crossed in front of the Mercedes. "It's good to have money, huh?" he said in Fishburne's direction. "It ain't bad," Fishburne called back. "It don't hurt." (Though numbers conveniently elude him, by his own admission he'll be "making a whole lot of money" from "The Matrix" alone.) "But you know what they say—'Mo' money, mo' problems.'" The light changed, and Fishburne accelerated. "I wasn't aware of any world but this one," he said, "until I was snatched up and taken to the Philippines to do 'Apocalypse Now.'"



"My film is not about Vietnam," Francis Ford Coppola said of his masterpiece, at Cannes in 1979. "It *is* Vietnam. It's what it was really like. It was crazy. And the way we made it was very much like the way the Americans were in Vietnam. We were in the jungle. There were too many of us. We had access to too much money, too much equipment. And little by little we went insane." Fishburne came of age in this mayhem. Fresh from his first feature film, "Cornbread, Earl and Me," he was fourteen when he lied about his age to get the part of Clean. (Coppola had been looking for a sixteen- or seventeen-year-old.) "I wasn't on the swimming team, the track team or the basketball team," Fishburne told *Essence* in 1994. "I didn't go to the prom. I didn't have dates." Instead, he signed up for the war.

During the year and a half that he was on location—most of 1976 and half of 1977—Fishburne adopted Coppola as a father figure and mentor. "He was gentle with me," Fishburne says. "If I came to him and said, 'So what are you doing?,' he'd take a minute and go, 'Oh, I'm doing this. . . .' He wouldn't dismiss me like I was accustomed to being dismissed by adults like my mother and father." Fishburne never attended college or drama school; instead, he studied with some of the finest actors in the land—Robert Duvall, Albert Hall, Frederic Forrest, Sam Bottoms, Martin Sheen, Dennis Hopper, and Marlon Brando among them. "I learned how to swing from Dennis Hopper," he says. "I learned how to improvise from him and from Coppola, because Coppola didn't give me any words." (Coppola often generated dialogue by handing his actors index cards with activities written on them and letting them find the words.)

One moonlit night when he was sixteen, Fishburne was sitting in a boat on the water while Coppola and his cinematographer, Vittorio Storaro, talked about Orson Welles's failed attempt to make a film of Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness," on which "Apocalypse Now" was also based. "Basically, they were patting each other on the back," Fishburne recalls. "They were talking about their intention to create a cinematic work of art that would last for generations. I went, 'You two motherfuckers are artists. You're making shit that's gonna influence people and touch people for generations. That means I must be one, too, 'cause I wouldn't be here if I wasn't.' I understood that the thing I was doing wasn't a lark." It was then, Fishburne said, that he began to think of himself "as an artist and to see film in artistic terms."

"My new marketing strategy is to sell stuff to you two."

On camera, Fishburne's behavior was controlled; off camera, it was another matter. He had fallen under the spell of Dennis Hopper. "He was reckless," Fishburne told *Playboy* in 1994. "He was wild. I'd never seen a human being behave the way Dennis behaved and get away with it. And I wanted to know how he did it. I followed him around for about five months. His energy, power, sheer audacity and pure guts were things I wanted." Graham says of Fishburne's experience, "Take your fourteen-year-old kid. Tell him, 'Dennis Hopper is your babysitter.' They gave him a friggin' assault rifle with live ammunition, all the drugs and prostitutes he could do. And in this completely uncontrolled environment—the most corrupt degraded society since the fall of the Roman Empire—built and paid for by the U.S. government, who's in charge? This coked-to-the-tits megalomaniac filmmaker. And there you go!"

Hattie, who had recently remarried and had moved with her new husband to the Philippines for the duration of the shoot, sent an S.O.S. to Fishburne's father. "Crazy ain't the word for it," says Papa Fish, who spent the next year on location as his son's personal corrections officer. "I had to be the Gestapo. I had to go to extremes with him. I even made him write out a ten-point plan that he was supposed to follow while we were there." On a visit to the local authorities, Papa Fish was told, "Your son and his compatriots are walking down the street smoking Thai sticks. We can't have that." "I went home and waxed his ass," he says. "After I did that, Francis Coppola comes to me and says, 'Why did you have to react so violently?' I said, 'Let me tell you something. I don't give a fuck about your company, your picture, or his so-called bullshit career. The next time I catch any one of your cast giving my son any type of drugs, I'm locking their fucking ass up!' "

Fishburne matriculated from "Apocalypse Now" with an artistic pedigree and an attitude. "He did not integrate into society very well," Graham recalls. "He was smoking more pot than any of us, which is saying a lot. He was into all this wild new stuff. His head was filled with visions of the apocalypse—not a healthy place for a seventeen-year-old's brain to be." In order to capitalize on the momentum she anticipated for her son after the release of the movie, Hattie moved with him to L.A., where he enrolled at Hollywood High School. He spent most of his time there dancing to Rolling Stones records in the quad outside the school, dressed like Jimi Hendrix, whom he was beginning to resemble. After six weeks, he'd had enough; he returned to New York to finish high school with his friends, living for the first time with his father.

In August of 1979, "Apocalypse Now" broke big; Fishburne didn't. He and Graham spent most of that summer drinking near the Prospect Park band shell. "He was getting angrier and angrier, yelling at people," Graham says. Once, the two boys and their friend Gloria Rivera spent an afternoon drinking beer in Central Park. "We needed to find some bushes to pee in," Graham says. "We're walking past the wall on Central Park West, and he sees Tavern on the Green, which has these big bay windows all around it that look onto Central Park. And if you go there at 1 P.M. on a Wednesday, who's going to be sitting on the other side of that glass but two well-heeled Wasp ladies with blue hair having their Waldorf salads. I'm over in the bushes doing my thing. And I hear Gloria let out this wail. I turn, and, I swear to God, Fishburne has whipped out his schlong and is peeing on the window, right at eye level. We ran like banshees."

Finally, Fishburne called Coppola, who was about to start shooting "One from the Heart." He offered Fishburne and Graham work on the crew. "There were not a lot of roles for him out there," says Coppola, who later wrote Fishburne into "Rumble Fish" (1983) and "The Cotton Club" (1984), and cast him in "Gardens of Stone" (1987). "I felt like he was one of my kids," he adds. Fishburne and Graham, with eighty dollars between them and a Fiat with a leaky gas tank, left Brooklyn for California. "We drove drunk," Graham says. "Neither of us had a license. I still have nightmares about that." But while they were on the road a writers' strike was called, and film production shut down for the best part of a year. Fishburne got no acting jobs for fifteen months. Instead, he worked as a doorman and a bouncer; he even cleaned offices with Graham, who briefly worked as a janitor in Culver City. "We were both alcoholics—full friggin' fledged," Graham says.

"Once I came home from 'Apocalypse Now,' I was no longer young and cute," Fishburne says. "I became tall, and a bit intimidating to people, partially because of the skin that I happen to come in." When people looked at him, they didn't see an eighteen-year-old boy; they saw, he says, "a twenty-six-year-old black male. Threatening." The only roles he was offered were as thugs and lowlifes. And Fishburne, who didn't deal well with rejection, *could* be scary. "There was no fucking way I didn't have some kind of skill," he says. "There was no way I didn't have something to offer. If I had been a white boy, them motherfuckers would have been dealing with me a whole lot differently. I didn't hide that. I walked in the room like I know where the fuck I've been, I know who I've been with, and I know what I know. And I know I'm a bad motherfucker, and I'm not coming in here trying to kowtow to you motherfuckers to give me a fucking job."

After a couple of years of being cast as a villain, Fishburne decided to turn a negative into a positive—to become, as he puts it, "the baddest motherfucker you have ever seen." His audition technique had a take-no-prisoners recklessness. To win the role of the mugger in Michael Winner's 1982 movie "Death Wish II" (Fishburne is the guy in the pink shades with his pants down during the gang bang of Charles Bronson's maid), he says, he "raped the chair, man." The day he went up for Paul Mazursky's "Willie & Phil" (1980), he ran into Graham and his girlfriend having a bad trip on psychedelic mushrooms. He took them along as props. "The film happened to be about a guy who teaches in an urban high school, and he's got all these freaky students," Graham says. "He challenges the one making all this trouble, and the kid delivers Hamlet's soliloquy." At the audition, while Graham sorted through the debris of a wastebasket he'd tipped over in the waiting room and his girlfriend shook the water cooler to watch the bubbles, Fishburne launched into the soliloquy. Afterward, according to Graham, "the casting director goes, 'O.K., do you think we could do that, but without, you know—' and he just looked at her and went, 'Nah, that's all I got for you today.' And picked us up and walked out of the room. They chased him down the hall and gave him the part."

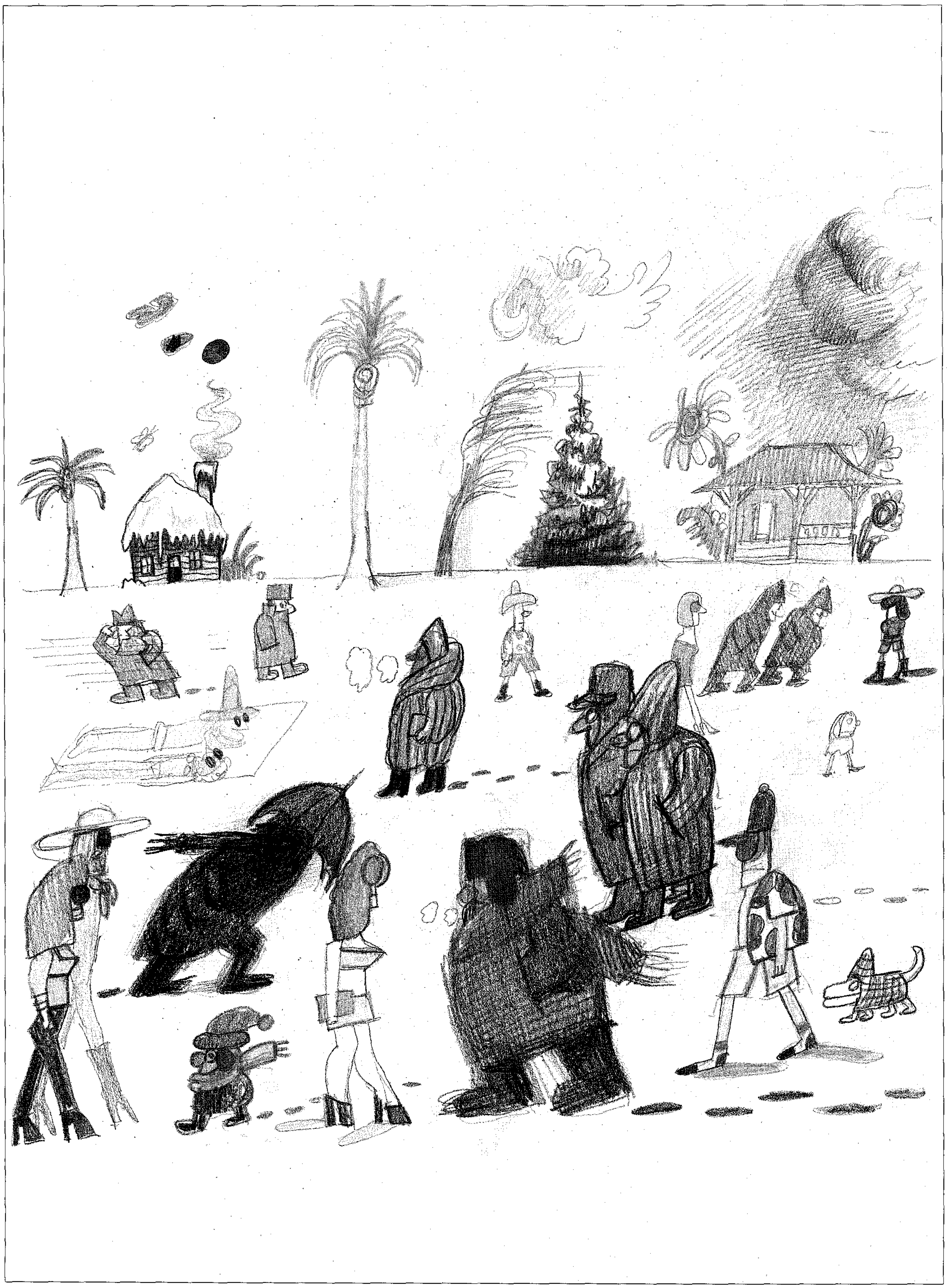
When Fishburne, then twenty-two, was called to audition for "The Cotton Club," his agent told him to prepare a song and a dance step; instead, Fishburne put on shoes he'd spray-painted red, a pink shirt, and white pants, and walked into the audition, he says, "looking like some kind of crazy Mexican-American hoodlum." Gregory Hines asked him what he was going to sing. Fishburne said, "I'm not gonna sing anything for you today. If I'm gonna be in this movie, I'm gonna play a gangster, O.K.?" In the end, Fishburne was given the part of the Harlem numbers kingpin Bumpy Johnson. "I knew when he did Bumpy Johnson that he could be the star of a movie," Coppola says. "He had a presence. He has never lost his warmth and sweetness—and depth. A villain is always better when somehow you sense those bottom basements in him."

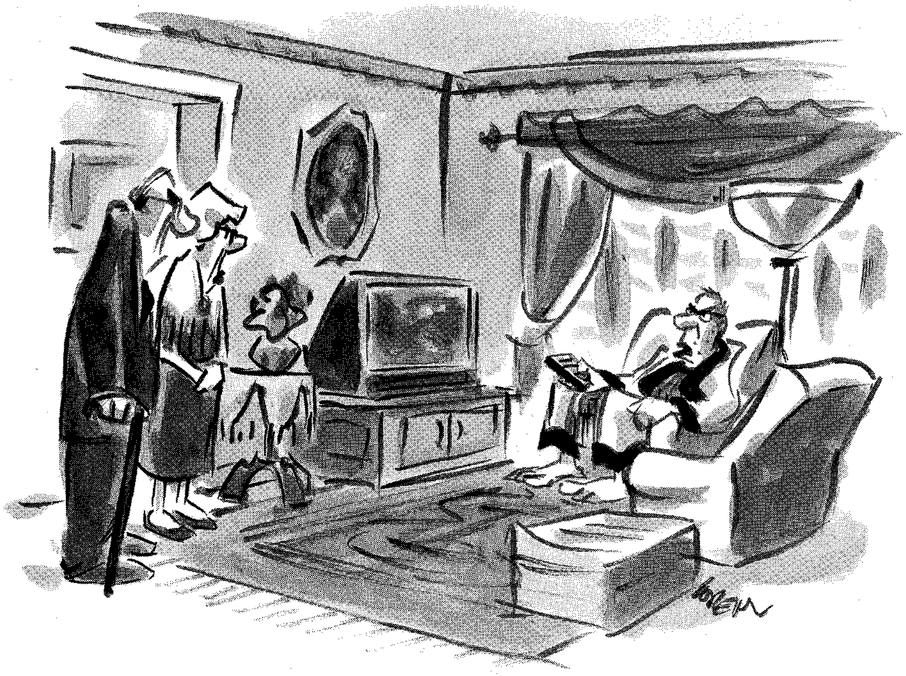
In 1986, Fishburne donned a purple Jheri-Curl wig and palomino chaps to play Cowboy Curtis on "Pee-wee's Playhouse." The part became a cult favorite and, finally, broke Fishburne out of the industry's profile of him. Two years later, he starred as the campus radical—and the only credible figure—in "School Daze," Spike Lee's musical satire about the tensions between middle-class black students. Then he won the role of Jimmy Jump in "King of New York," despite the fact that the director, Abel Ferrara, had originally conceived the part for a white actor. "I had to campaign for that," Fishburne says. "I went to Abel and I said, 'Listen, I have an idea about how this character can be played. And if you give me twenty-four hours to get the character together, I'll come in, present the character to you, and then, if you don't like it, cool. I'll do the part that you want me to do." (He had been pencilled in for the role of the policeman who was eventually played by Wesley Snipes.) Three days later, in the presence of Ferrara and the film's star, Christopher Walken, Fishburne arrived in all of Jimmy Jump's iconic hip-hop flash—bowler, chain, gold tooth. For three hours, he told stories in character. In his version of the role, Jump's menace was born of glee, not grudge. "Jump loved his life," Fishburne has said. "He loved the fact that he was fast, he was loose, he could kill people." He got the part. After almost twenty films, he admitted to the London *Guardian*, this was the first time that anyone had given him "something to run with."

But it was John Singleton's landmark "Boyz N the Hood," a shocking account of ghetto violence and anomie, that made him a star. Fishburne first met Singleton when the aspiring young director had just finished his freshman year at the University of Southern California film school and Fishburne was working on "Pee-wee's Playhouse." "I was in awe of him," Singleton says. "I knew he had just done a film with Spike Lee. I asked him questions about it. After a while, I got him on the discussion of what I was doing with myself. I just said, 'Hey, maybe one day I'm gonna write something for you.' He's, like, 'How old are you?' 'I'm nineteen, man.' He's like, 'Go on, brother, go ahead and do it!' " Fishburne was the

SAUL STEINBERG, UNTITLED (1975) ©THE SAUL STEINBERG FOUNDATION

SKETCHBOOK BY SAUL STEINBERG





"If you two don't stop bugging me, I'm never going to grow up and move out!"

first person to see the script for "Boyz." He became "the father of the film, the veteran actor that everyone went to," Singleton says. Singleton, who became the youngest director ever nominated for an Oscar, also consulted with Fishburne about how to deal with his cast. " 'Never give line readings,' " Singleton recalls him saying. " 'Try to give actors the space to explore.' "

When Fishburne played Ike Turner in "What's Love Got to Do with It," two years later, part of the energy that fuelled his performance was an ongoing disagreement between him and the director, Brian Gibson, who was white and British. "He was at a crucial moment of his career," Gibson, who died in January, told me. "He wanted to get away from playing heavies, and the real question in the community about Laurence Fishburne was: Can this man be a lead?" Gibson went on, "It was very, very difficult ever to give him a note. He often knew better, genuinely knew better. But sometimes notes were valuable. I remember one particular moment, which actually was one of the more important moments in the film, where Ike has a fight with Tina in the back of a limo. He takes off his shoe and whacks her, and she fights him back for the first time in their relationship. At that moment, we did a closeup. And I remember it was absolute ham—an unusual thing from Laurence because he is one of those people who judge their own performances incredibly well. I remember having to insist quite strongly to do it again, and thank God I did. Had we used that in the film, it probably wouldn't have got an Oscar nomination."

Still, much of the vivid force of the film is due to Fishburne, who rewrote, he says, "ninety per cent of the dialogue" in order to make the character of Ike Turner more than a caricature of a wife-beater, cokehead, and jailbird. "I was trying to humanize it," Fishburne said. "I was trying to give him some dignity. I was trying to make him a person." As Ike, Fishburne—with a pompadour, a pencil-thin mustache, and a brazen leer—could exhibit his own potent sexuality. "He's scary sexy," says Alfre Woodard, who co-starred with Fishburne in the 1997 HBO movie "Miss Evers' Boys." "He's the kind of sexy where your mother would say, 'O.K., this is the point when you get up and leave the room.' It's like, 'I better get out of here. I might follow this fool.'" Fishburne parsed Turner's psyche in such a complicated array of colors—at once ruthless, funny, tragic, terrifying, and lost—that even his ugliness was captivating. "Anybody who can make you like Ike Turner—he's gotta be a great actor," the playwright August Wilson says. "It was a brilliant performance."

Fishburne was thirty-one when "What's Love Got to Do with It" came out, and his career took on new amperage. In an eighteen-month period between 1992 and 1994, he earned an Oscar nomination, an Emmy Award (for a guest appearance on Robert De Niro's show "Tribeca"), and a Tony (for "Two Trains Running"). "If Fish knew how to sing, he would be able to go up for a Grammy," Singleton says. After delivering a particularly eloquent acceptance speech at the Tony Awards, Fishburne ran into Wilson, who was in the lobby smoking a cigarette. "You've been holding out on me, man," Wilson said. "You're a writer." He pulled a pen from his pocket and handed it to Fishburne. "You should write something," he said. Shortly afterward, Wilson received "Riff Raff" in the mail.

Since his masterly "Othello," in 1995, Fishburne's most challenging roles have been on television (in "Miss Evers' Boys" and Michael Apted's "Always Outnumbered") and on Broadway (as Henry II in the 1999 revival of "The Lion in Winter"). The "Matrix" trilogy took three years of his time, but in those hyperactive futuristic thrillers, where the production design does most of the performing, Fishburne was required to pose more than to act.

For the past year, Fishburne has not acted at all. Instead, he is enjoying a new marriage, a new métier, and a new house. He lives in a two-story yellow villa in the Hollywood Hills, with his wife of a year and a half, the thirty-four-year-old actress Gina Torres—"This is my first home," he says. The house has high, vaulted ceilings; large, uncluttered rooms; tall, arched, glass-panelled doors that look out over Runyon Canyon Park; and a long, open kitchen that seems the size of a bowling alley. His office, where he writes, is the smallest room in the house. On the walls are photos of Bill Cosby, Gandhi, and Bumpy Johnson, and a framed letter from the King of Jordan inviting him to use the country as a location for a film version of Paulo Coelho's 1988 international best-seller "The Alchemist," a spiritual odyssey set in the time of the Inquisition. The film, in which he will star, will be his second directorial outing, and his first script written exclusively for the screen. On his desk is a well-thumbed volume called "Structuring the Play," and tucked away in a corner is "Playwriting in Process: Thinking and Working Theatrically."

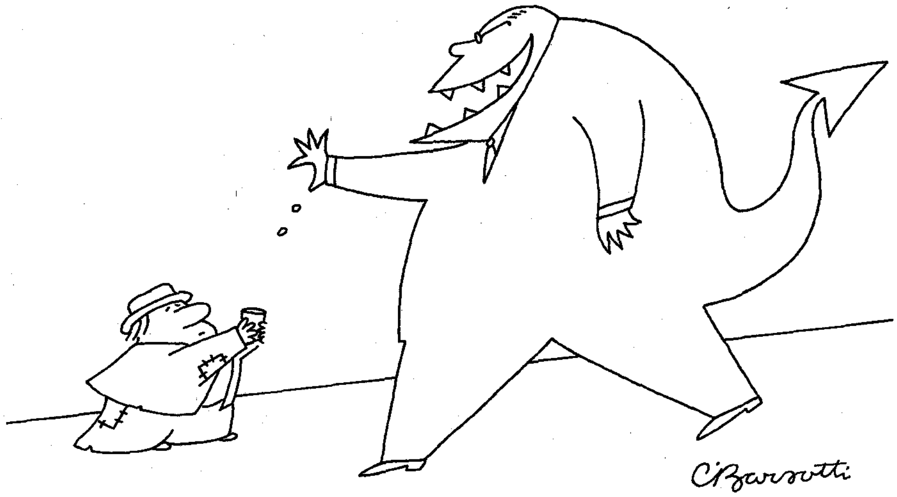
Fishburne, who has no trouble expressing feelings, is rather more challenged by the idea of constructing those feelings on the page. "What the fuck is 'theme'?" he says. "What the fuck is 'structure'? What the fuck is 'tempo'? I know that internally; I don't know it intellectually." In "Riff Raff," which was produced Off Broadway in 1995, with one claustrophobic set and three fine actors, emotion and energy carried the day. However, after writing and directing a messy film adaptation, "Once in the Life" (2000), Fishburne learned the pitfalls of feeling without form. Since then, he has written a second play, a sprawling but promising work entitled "The Complex," which is dedicated to "the wounded child in all of us" and is loosely based on the dilapidated L.A. apartment house all the way out on La Brea, in an area known as the Jungle, where he and Hattie holed up in the early eighties.

Hattie herself, however, is no longer in his life. She and Fishburne have not spoken in three years. She was not invited to his wedding and has never been to his house. In 1994, she complained to the press that her son had been lost to the "sycophantic and bombastic swirl of the Hollywood lifestyle"; in 1996, she went on "Geraldo" to plead poverty and broadcast a sense of entitlement. It was a performance that she is happy to repeat. "I have not gotten a Mother's Day gift, a Christmas gift, none of that," she told me. "I was the sole investor in his career until he stepped out on his own. I haven't gotten a return. The investment just multiplied—it exploded—and I don't have a return."

"She's projecting it, but in reality *she* is the robber baron," says Maurice Watson, who remembers Hattie envying and appropriating Fishburne's success (along with his earnings) in ways that would be hard to admit for a woman who has written of herself, "Hattie consistently shines as an individual, a mother, and a member of the community." Watson says, "She always wanted to go out, to be part of the in-crowd. She had delusions of grandeur. She wanted to be bigger than she was. She wanted to spend more money than she had. She wanted to be running with the Joneses." One day when Fishburne was in his mid-twenties, he went to the bank to withdraw some money. "I had about ten thousand dollars in the bank, and the teller told me that I had only five thousand," he says. When he protested, the teller explained, "Yeah, well, your mother came and took half the money." "She shouldn't have been spending my money, but she was," Fishburne says. "That was the moment I went, 'O.K., this ends.' "

Although Hattie stopped overseeing Fishburne's career in 1984, she can't stop merging her story with his. She gives seminars for parents who want to get their children into show business. ("Laurence Fishburne's Mom will share the steps she took in guiding her son's career from toddler to teen to Academy Award Nominee," a recent press release announces.) In 2000, Fishburne made a stab at reconciliation. He invited his mother to meet Torres at Musso & Frank's, an old Hollywood hangout. "She was completely narcissistic, obviously uncomfortable with the size of her son, with the size of his life," Torres says. "He was so unapologetically happy. It pissed her off." Fishburne took Hattie to meet President Clinton; she also accompanied him to the première of the James Bond film "The World Is Not Enough"—a title that proved almost comically prophetic. But Hattie soon reverted to her old, transgressive behavior. "She sent me this tape," Fishburne says. "It had all this mood music in the background. She was speaking in dulcet tones and reminiscing about the old days when she and I were thick as thieves and shit. It was really something that she should have sent to an old boyfriend, not me." He remembers telling her, "I can't be involved in this. I can't live this life with you anymore. I can't be everything and anything you want me to be. I'm a grown man." Now, he says, "I'm waiting for my mother to really be ill, where she can't take care of herself. Then I'll go take care of her."

Fishburne had got married for the first time at the age of twenty-three, to Hajna O. Moss, a dancer and casting director who was a member of the Bahamian royal family. Moss was tall, articulate, and, according to Graham—who refers to her as Fishburne's "mother Part II"—"organizationally controlling." He says, "She had chutzpah that would flatten Capitol Hill and presence that would bend the glass on a CitiBank teller. For me, it was like watching Cruella De Ville." Moss got Fishburne out of his Jimi Hendrix mode; she toned up his language and his wardrobe. "Damn, she knew how to shop," Graham says. "It definitely benefitted his career, the same way that his mom did. But all she wanted to be was rich Mrs. Fishburne. But she wasn't rich enough to be happy, and she wasn't warm enough to be desired." Although they had two chil-



"Don't say it never trickled."

dren—Langston, in 1987, and Montana, in 1991—and Fishburne adopted Moss's five-year-old nephew, Terrill, they divorced in 1995.

Afterward, according to Graham, Fishburne was "terrified of being trapped again." His relationship with Torres, a Cuban-American who had established herself in Broadway musical theatre, was rocky at the beginning. In their first four years together, they broke up twice. "We had started this wonderful love affair," Torres says. "All the elements were there except commitment." Fishburne had just got divorced, and had, according to Torres, acquired "a bit of a stable." "The last thing he wanted was to get involved," she says. "He didn't know how to function inside a healthy relationship. There was a bit of a saboteur involved." While Torres was in New Zealand playing a warrior princess in rubber hot pants for the TV show "Cleopatra 2525," Fishburne began to "come to terms with the buttons that were installed in him by his mother—the build-me-up-shoot-me-down dynamic he sought in partners," Torres says. After their second breakup, she says, Fishburne "went and sorted himself out."

THEN TIME

In winter, in a small room, a man and a woman
Have been making love for hours. Exhausted,
Very busy wringing out each other's body,
They look at each other suddenly and laugh.
"What is this?" he says. "I can't get enough of you,"
She says, a woman who thinks of herself as not given
To cliché. She runs her fingers across his chest,
Tentative touches, as if she were testing her wonder.
He says, "Me too." And she, beginning to be herself
Again: "You mean you can't get enough of you, either?"
"I mean," he takes her arms in his hands and shakes them,
"Where does this come from?" She cocks her head
And looks into his face. "Do you really want to know?"
"Yes," he says. "Self-hatred," she says. "Longing for God."
Kisses him again. "It's not what it is"—a wry shrug—
"It's where it comes from." Kisses his bruised mouth
A second time, a third. Years later, in another city,
They're having dinner in a quiet restaurant near a park.
Fall. Earlier that day, hard rain: leaves, brass-colored
And smoky crimson, flying everywhere. Twenty years older,
She is very beautiful. An astringent person. She'd become,
She said, an obsessive gardener, her daughters grown.
He's trying not to be overwhelmed by love or pity
Because he sees she has no hands. He thinks
She must have given them away. He imagines,
Very clearly, how she wakes some mornings
(He has a vivid memory of her younger self, stirred
From sleep, flushed, just opening her eyes)
To momentary horror because she can't remember
What she did with them, why they are gone,
And then remembers, and calms herself, so that the day
Takes on its customary sequence once again.

At opposite ends of their red Viking stove, Fishburne and Torres worked at separate culinary tasks. Fishburne's department was collard greens; Torres's was short ribs. The next day was Thanksgiving, and the short ribs were a supplement to the twenty-three-pound turkey they were preparing. "This is all about cookin' off the bone, baby," Fishburne said, before slicing parsnips for a pasta dish that he eventually passed over the large wooden counter to his three children, who had just flown in from the East.

Four months is the longest that Fishburne has ever gone without seeing his children. Nonetheless, not long ago Langston, who is now sixteen and already a published poet, handed his father a two-hundred-and-thirty-four-page memoir entitled "Diary of a Nomad." "He's gonna have to take space just like everybody else," Fishburne says. "I've done everything I can do. Me pretending to be smaller in the world is not gonna help my son get any bigger." He adds, "I said to them, 'Does it sometimes aggravate you and piss you off that I'm famous?' They said, 'Yeah.' I said, 'Well, guess what? Me, too, but that's just the fucking way it is, it's a by-product of what I do.' "

The question of how the world regards Fishburne came up after I incidentally mentioned that I would be spending the next day at the home of Gordon Davidson, the artistic director of the Mark Taper Forum, with whom, it turned out, Fishburne had a bone to pick. Around the time that Fishburne emerged as a star, in the early nineties, he reclaimed the gravitas of his full name, Laurence Fishburne, but Davidson apparently still addressed him by his eighties moniker, Larry. "Tell that motherfucker my name is not Larry!" Fishburne said, his head swinging from side to side like a dashboard figurine. "My motherfucking name is Laurence! Since you're having fucking Thanksgiving at his house, tell that motherfucker to cut that shit out. And his fucking wife, too. I love him. I've known him all my life but, *God damn*, they make me mad with that shit. Fucking ten years I've been calling myself Laurence! Every time I see this motherfucker, he calls me Larry."

"You were Larry to a lot of people for a very long time," Torres chimed in.

"That is who I was—and it's not who I am," he snapped. "I didn't ask to be billed as Larry Fishburne. That was my name for my friends in my neighborhood as a kid. That's my nick, like Fish. But my professional name, the first gig I ever did, my whole name is 'Introducing Laurence Fishburne III.' In 'Cornbread, Earl and Me,' my first film, that's how I was billed. If you look at 'Death Wish 2,'

She asks him if he thinks about her. "Occasionally,"
He says, smiling. "And you?" "Not much," she says.
"I think it's because we never existed inside time."
He studies her long fingers, a pianist's hands,
Or a gardener's, strong, much-used, as she fiddles
With her wineglass and he understands, vaguely,
That it must be his hands that are gone. Then
He's describing a meeting he sat in all day,
Chaired by someone they'd felt, many years before,
Mutually superior to . . . "You know the expression,
'A perfect fool,' " she'd said. And he had liked her tone
Of voice. Now she begins a story of the company
In Maine she orders bulbs from, begun by a Polish refugee
Married to a French-Canadian separatist from Quebec.
It's a story with many surprising turns and a rare
Chocolate-black lily at the end. He's listening,
Studying her face, still turning over her remark.
He decides that she thinks more symbolically
Than he does and that it seemed to have saved her,
For all her fatalism, from certain kinds of pain.
She finds herself thinking what a literal man he is,
Notices, as if she were recalling it, his pleasure
In the menu, and the cooking, and the architecture of the room.
It moves her—in the way that earnest limitation
Can be moving, and she is moved by her attraction to him.
Also by what he was to her. She sees her own avidity
To live then, or not to not have lived might be more accurate,
From a distance, the way a driver might see from the road
A startled deer running across an open field in the rain.
Wild thing. Here and gone. Death made it poignant, or,
If not death exactly, which she'd come to think of
As creatures seething in a compost heap, then time.

—*Robert Hass*

you will see that I am billed as Laurence Fishburne III. So, yeah, if I ask somebody to call me Laurence, and they continue to call me Larry, no, I don't like that shit one little fucking bit at all. Sorry. And that ain't got nothing to do with me not knowing my fucking place. That's my fucking name."

In the middle of Fishburne's tirade, the phone rang. He picked it up and, to general laughter, shouted into it, "*Stop fucking calling my house!*"

He continued, "What fucking astonishes me is that people are under this impression that they're not disrespecting me, they're not slighting me at all—they just feel they know me. I understand the nature of what I do is to be publicly available and to reveal the intimate details of my character. I get that. But the fact of the matter is that I have publicly gone on the record and said, 'Yeah, I prefer to be called Laurence.' I decide who I am, what I want to be. You don't get to choose. I don't give a fuck how much money you pay! I don't give a fuck how many movies you watch! Fuck you! This is mine. This right here. Mine. Next in line, these ones right here"—he gestured at his kids. "And Bingo"—his black-and-white English pointer. "And if you don't like it you can fucking get in line to suck my dick! Fuck you!"

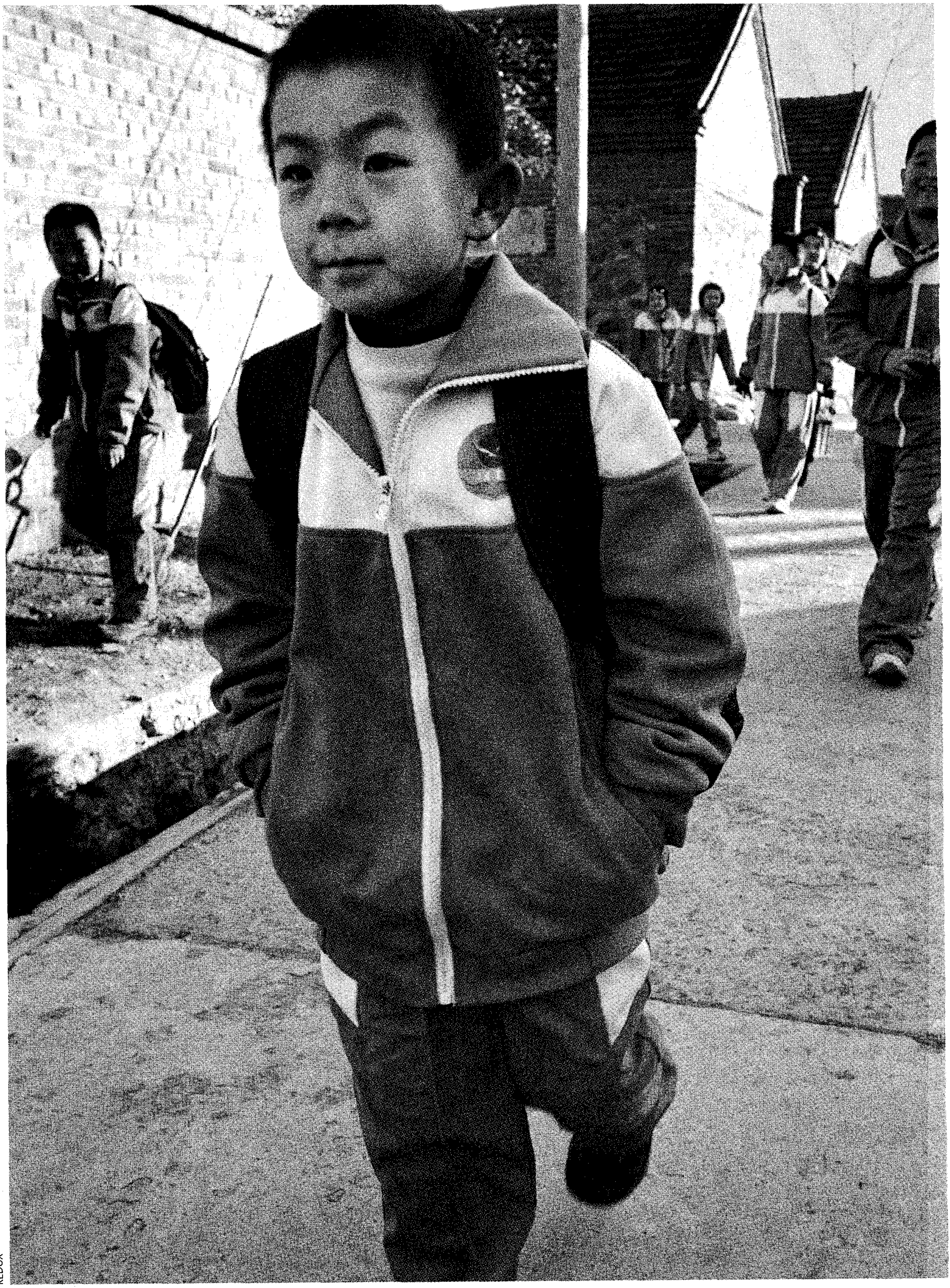
He paused, then added, "Anyway, I just thought, maybe, you could pass that on to Gordon."

At the end of the evening, Fishburne said that he wanted to show me something. We climbed into the leather bucket seats of his silver Aston Martin V12 Vanquish, put Mose Allison into the tape deck, and set off for a spin around the two shabby square miles just below his house, which were the backdrop of his early striving. As he pointed out the hotel where he'd stayed with Hattie as a teen-ager, the church where he'd auditioned for "Two Trains Running," the former Zero Zero Club, where he and other aspiring actors used to meet and get fed, I was still trying to fathom his rant. Naming is claiming. For Fishburne, who says he felt "inappropriately appropriated" in childhood, one of the hardest tasks has been to possess his own life—his talent, his heart, his name.

He stopped the car beside Hollywood High School. Across the length of the large, off-white stucco building were painted portraits, strung like charms on a bracelet, of some local luminaries—Dorothy Dandridge, Judy Garland, Rudolph Valentino, Carol Burnett, Cher, and others. "That's me as Othello," Fishburne said, pointing to the spot between Lana Turner and Cantinflas. "Isn't that great?" He stared at the building for a moment in silence. Then he said, "You know, that makes me feel good, 'cause I walked all over this motherfucker, from Western Avenue to Laurel Canyon Boulevard. I used to walk this motherfucker on the regular. Couldn't catch a break, couldn't get fucking arrested."

On the way back, I asked him what would have happened if he hadn't been successful. "It wasn't about making it," he said. "It was about doing it. I would have gone on the boulevard and created a fucking show and done it on the street. When I was thirty, I was able to go, 'O.K., if you never get to be the guy that we all would love to be, what then? I can make a living. That's cool.' There was a guy who used to perform on the corner of Hollywood and Cherokee—clown suit and some strange fucking circus music. I made up my mind when I saw him. If those motherfuckers ain't gonna hire me to be in a movie, I'll do some shit like that."

The car roared under us as Fishburne turned on the ignition. Then he accelerated up toward the glinting hills, past the rundown hotels that are the forlorn landmarks of his struggle—the Magic Hotel, the Highland Gardens, the Montecito—proof, if more were needed, of his spectacular survival. Five minutes later, Fishburne was home. ♦



REDUX

Wei Jia on his way home from school. As a four-year-old, he had been allowed to roam free in his village, and he moved easily in the mounta

ths above it. Photograph by Mark Leong.

LETTER FROM CHINA

KINDERGARTEN

A young boy, a foreigner, and a desperate drive to the capital.

BY PETER HESSLER

The night before his first day of kindergarten, Wei Jia refused to talk about it. He was five years old, and he had spent the summer playing in Sancha, wearing nothing but a dirty tank top and a pair of underpants. Sancha is a small village in the mountains north of Beijing, and, along with a Chinese-American friend named Mimi Kuo, I rent a weekend house there from Wei Jia's relatives. The village is home to around a hundred and fifty peasants, who make their living primarily from orchards. That Sunday evening, while we were eating dinner, I asked Wei Jia if he was excited about going to school the next day. He ignored the question.

Earlier in the day, Mimi and I had made the two-hour drive from Beijing. It was the first week of September, and the walnuts had come into season; peasants carried long sticks that they used to knock the nuts onto the ground. Along the road we saw dozens of men, some on bicycles, their sticks poised as if for a joust. We also passed a topless elderly woman. Her silver hair was well groomed, and she walked at a determined pace. I pulled over to the side of the road.

"Leave me alone!" the woman shouted when Mimi stepped out of the car. "There's nothing wrong!" Tears shined on her cheeks; she clutched her shirt in one hand. When the woman stormed past, we could see fresh bruises across her back.

We drove a bit farther and tried again. She began screaming the moment Mimi opened the door. "I'm not going back there!" the woman shouted. "I'm not going back!" She veered out into the road, causing an oncoming car to slow down. Perhaps in the next village there would be somebody who knew her and would help. It was only two miles; surely she would make it that far. This kind of thing happens in the countryside, and sometimes an outsider's attempt to help only does more harm. "*Mei banfa*," the Chinese say—nothing can be done.

At seven o'clock the following morning, we left for school. Wei Jia wore khaki trousers and a red T-shirt. I had given him a new Mickey Mouse backpack, and his mother had put a pencil box in one of the pockets. Inside the box was a single pencil. The pencil was newly sharpened; the trousers still had a crease. It was the first time I had ever seen Wei Jia in clean clothes.

I'd known the boy's family since 2001, when Mimi and I began spending time in Sancha. I went to the village because it was quiet—there were no restaurants, no shops, no bus service. When I sat at my desk to write, I usually heard only the sounds of rural life: the bray of a mule, the wind in the walnut trees. Three or four times a week, a flatbed truck rumbled up the hill to sell basic groceries. Twice a day, in the morning and just before sunset, the government propaganda speakers on the telephone poles screeched to life. Village announcements, national news, Communist Party slogans—all of it echoed off the valley's high rock walls. But rarely in Sancha did I hear the sound of children playing. The local elementary school closed years ago, because young families tended to move away; all across China, peasants have been leaving rural areas for the economic opportunity of the cities. The few families that remained in Sancha were small, because of the government's planned-birth policies, and the children attended schools in the more heavily populated villages down in the valley, ten miles away, where they either boarded or lived with relatives.

That year, Wei Jia was the only kindergartner from Sancha. He was going to live with his grandparents in Xingying, a village with an elementary school. On the morning of his first day, Mimi drove the car and the boy sat on my lap, in the front seat. Wei Ziqi, his father, and Cao Chunmei, his mother, rode in the back. Between them sat Wei Ziqi's older brother—the Idiot.

Once, I asked Cao Chunmei what the Idiot's real name was, but she didn't know. Everybody simply called him the *shazi*, which means "idiot." He was in his forties. Most villages in China seem to have a *shazi* or two from that generation, because in the past the peasant diet often lacked iodine. A pregnant woman who does not consume enough iodine runs the risk of bearing a mentally handicapped child. Nowadays, the widespread distribution of iodized salt has dramatically reduced such birth defects in rural China.

Generally, the Idiot seemed as happy as anybody in Sancha. He ate well, and he spent his days on the Weis' front porch, high on the mountain. From the porch one could see for miles: the tile-roofed village, the winding road, the ruined traces of the Great Wall atop the mountain peaks. These were the boundaries of the Idiot's world. He couldn't do much work in the fields, and he couldn't talk. Whenever he wanted to say something, he contorted his face with such passion that it seemed as if the power of speech had fled precisely at that moment and he was just beginning to grapple with its loss. But in fact he had never spoken. The villagers ignored his attempts to communicate.

This was the first time I had seen the Idiot leave Sancha, and I asked Wei Ziqi why he was coming with us. "We have a little problem to take care of at the government office," he said.

Wei Jia leaned forward with both hands on the dashboard as we drove out of the village. He rarely got to ride in an automobile, and the experience for him was anything but passive. At every turn, I felt him edging toward the windshield, trying to see what was around the bend. He lurched forward whenever we reached the crest of a hill. I have never seen a child's car seat in China, and I was keenly aware of the fact that I should put Wei Jia in the back; but it would have broken his heart. And so I held him tightly.

We came down from the mountains, past the freshly cut stalks of wheat and corn in the valley. The men with sticks were going at the walnuts; husks crunched beneath our tires. Children walked along the road. "See, they have backpacks, too," Cao Chunmei said. "They're going to school just like you." Wei Jia's arms were stiff against the dash.

As we approached Bohai Township, Wei Ziqi asked Mimi to stop at the government office. Then he explained why the Idiot had come along.

"The government is supposed to pay a monthly fee to help us take care of him," he said. "That's the law. I've asked the Party Secretary in Sancha about it, but she hasn't helped. So the only thing to do is to come here ourselves. I'll ask them to pay the fee now, and if they don't, then I'll leave the Idiot until they're willing to pay it. It's their responsibility."

"You're going to leave him at the government office?" Mimi asked.

"Yes," Wei Ziqi said. "It's the only way to get their attention."

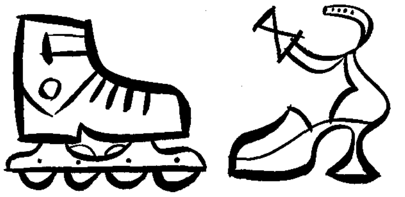
Mimi asked how much the monthly fee should be.

"Fifty yuan at the very least," Wei Ziqi said. It was the equivalent of about six dollars.

We parked outside the government compound. In front, there was a sculpture consisting of a shiny steel ball and an enormous twisted rod. Many of the local townships had recently erected sculptures in a similar style, accompanied by slogans intended to inspire images of modernity and prosperity. The Bohai Township slogan was "The Star of the Century." The sculpture was hideous. Wei Ziqi walked through the gate, followed by his brother. The Idiot's face had been blank all morning.

Wei Jia kept his hands on the dash. Five minutes later, his father returned. He was alone. We kept driving.

Wei Jia was the smallest five-year-old I have ever known. His mother often worried about his health; he was a finicky eater, and he weighed only thirty pounds. Four-year-olds towered over him; a child of three was often nearly as big. Wei Jia's mind was sharp, but he had a speech impediment, and even his parents had difficulty understanding him. Yet he had a wiry strength, and his sense of balance was remarkable. For the last year, he had been allowed to roam free in the village, and he moved easily along the mountain paths above his home. It was impossible to wear him out. He almost never cried. His capacity for roughhousing was infinite: it was as if the toughness and dexterity of a nine-year-old had been squeezed into a three-year-old's body. Over time, he came to call me Mogui Shushu (Uncle Monster), a play on the traditional term of respect used by Chinese children for adults. I was the first foreigner he had ever met.



Wei Jia's face was a perfect oval. His hair was cropped short, and his eyes glowed with mischief. But his parents could set him straight at a moment's notice. They avoided praising him—like traditional Chinese parents, they had a deep fear of flattery. Partly it was modesty, but there was also the superstition that pride would attract misfortune.

Occasionally, if I wanted to annoy Mimi with my Western ways, I would relentlessly praise the boy to Cao Chunmei: "Wei Jia is so good-looking."

"He's ugly," his mother would say immediately.

"He's so smart."

"He's stupid. Not a bit smart."

"What a nice child."

"Cut it out," Mimi said, in English.

"He's a bad boy," the mother said.

The only praise that I ever heard the parents give Wei Jia was a single adjective: *laoshi*. The dictionary defines it as "honest," but the term is difficult to translate. It also means obedient, as well as having a certain sense of propriety that is characteristic of people in the countryside. "Wei Jia is *laoshi*," his parents would say, and that was the closest they came to pride.

We parked by the back gate of the Xingying Elementary School. A teacher greeted us and led us inside. Wei Jia's face was blank. He walked into the classroom, stopped dead, and announced, loudly, "This place is no good!"

His parents tried to grab him, but he squirmed free and ran out the door. He was crying now, rushing back through the gate to the car. "I'm going home!" he said. "I don't want to be here!"

"If you were me, you'd be self-absorbed, too."

His mother followed him. The other children looked up and then lost interest. The classroom was dirty, and there was a hole in the ceiling. The blackboard was chipped and scarred. Twenty children sat at their desks; each of them played with a pile of Lego-like blocks. There were only three girls. Bohai isn't strictly a one-child township—like many parts of China that are mountainous and less populated, this area allows peasants in some villages to have a second child if the first is a girl. But it's not unusual in China for people to bribe doctors for ultrasound information, which is restricted by law. Locals told me that the majority of babies born in Xingying are boys.

Outside, Wei Jia stood in the dust beside the car, crying. He struggled against anybody who tried to lead him back into the school. Usually, Wei Ziqi is strict with his son, but he seemed to sympathize with this fear, and now he tried to reason with him. "Everybody goes to school," Wei Ziqi said patiently. "I did, and so did your mother. Aunt Mimi went to school, and so did Uncle Monster."

The schoolyard's loudspeakers crackled, and music came on for the flag-raising. The older children, wearing the red kerchiefs of the Young Pioneers, marched in place while the national anthem played. Wei Jia's face was creased with panic. Until now, he had never seen more than a handful of children together at once.

It took nearly forty-five minutes to calm him down. His father carried him into the classroom; his mother sat him down behind a desk. After ten minutes, he made another move for the door, but this time they caught him. He cried again, another hard burst, and then he calmed down. Resignation furrowed his forehead.

We left as quietly as we could. I asked Wei Ziqi where the bathroom was, and he told me just to use the schoolyard fence on the way out. I could hear the children's voices—talking, laughing, chanting lessons—while I pissed in the weeds. We had been at the school for almost an hour. The car seemed empty on the way home.

That day, the Idiot escaped twice from the government office. The first time, the cadres caught him just outside the gate. The second time, he made it into Bohai Township. It took a while for them to find him.

The officials telephoned Wei Ziqi and told him to pick up his brother; Wei Ziqi requested the subsidy. Neither side would budge, and finally, late in the afternoon, the cadres put the Idiot in a car and drove into the mountains. They dropped him off two miles outside Sancha. It was a steep climb, and the Idiot was not accustomed to such distances; he was fortunate to find his way back.

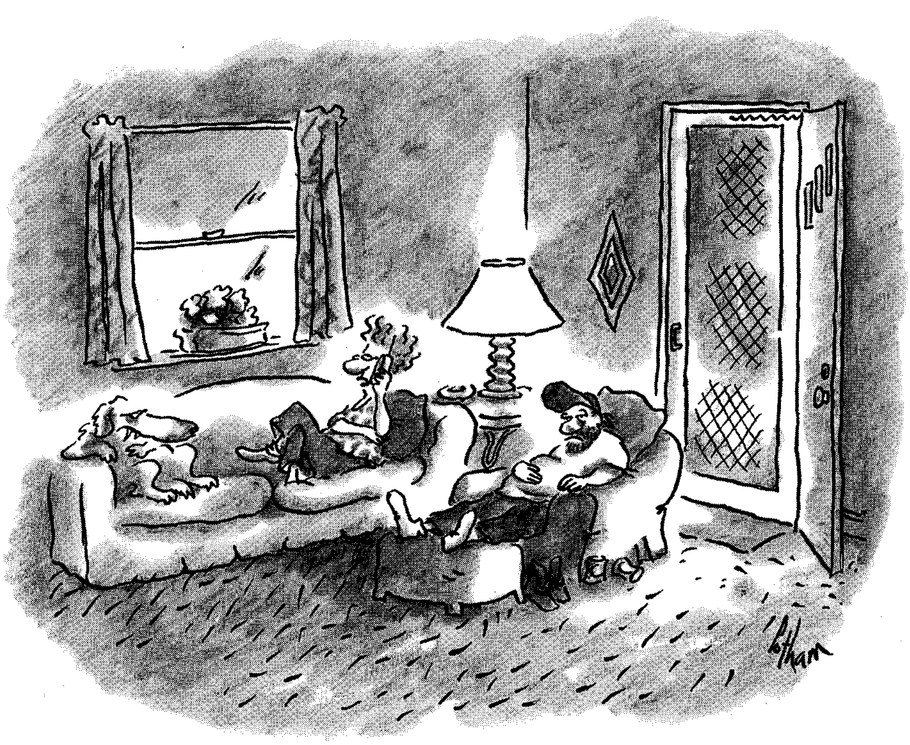
I heard all of this later, from Wei Ziqi, who was more or less satisfied with the exchange. The county government—a higher level than the township—had agreed to review the issue of the subsidy.

The next time I visited Sancha, the Idiot greeted me with an enormous grin and pointed at my parked automobile. He kept grunting and gesturing. I realized that he was telling the story of our trip into the valley. "I know," I said. "I remember." I wanted to tell him that I hadn't understood that situation until it was too late—*mei banfa*. But there was no way to communicate my regret, and the Idiot continued his gestures. He seemed thrilled to see me again.

During the National Day school holiday, Wei Jia returned home with a series of purple bruises across his legs and back. It was the first week of October, and the corn had come into season; the Weis had piled their harvested crop on the porch. Wei Jia spent an afternoon playing on it. Afterward, his parents noticed that the bruises had darkened. They decided that the boy should see a doctor.

Mimi and I had come to Sancha for the holiday, and I offered to drive Wei Jia and his father down to Huairou, the nearest city. From the mountains, Huairou is roughly halfway to Beijing, and in recent years it has grown from a small town into a satellite city of the capital. At the hospital, a nurse performed a blood test and told us that the boy's *xuexiaoban* count was low. I was unfamiliar with the term, and I didn't have my dictionary.

"His count is only seventeen thousand," the nurse said. "It should be more



"The reports that he had huge stockpiles of money proved to be untrue."

than a hundred and fifty thousand." She recommended that we immediately go to the Children's Hospital in Beijing for further tests.

Wei Jia had been born at a hospital in the capital, but this was his first time back. He was quiet during the drive to Beijing, as if sensing that something important was happening. Once we arrived at the hospital, I felt as if everybody was staring at us—the obvious foreigner, the obvious peasants. Wei Ziqi wore a surplus security-guard-uniform vest—it's a common garment for men in the countryside—and the boy was dressed in a filthy green sweatshirt. His cloth shoes had holes in the toes.

We joined a line for another blood test. There were about thirty other children, and all of them looked like city kids—pampered products of China's urban one-child policy, which, along with rising living standards, has undermined the traditional strictness in child-rearing. At the hospital, most children were accompanied by both parents, and often at least two grandparents as well. The adults bickered and shoved in the queue; the children whined and cried. Near my feet, a small child vomited on the floor. Inside the lab area, a little girl slipped out of the line to tinker with a tray of test tubes and slides. "Stop that!" a nurse shouted, slapping the child's hand. A sign on the wall proclaimed, "With Your Coöperation and Our Experience, We Will Take Good Care of Your Precious."

When Wei Jia's turn finally came, his face twisted as if he were going to cry. "Be *laoshi!*" Wei Ziqi said firmly, and the boy calmed down. But he was shaking after the blood test was finished.

The doctor on duty—dressed in a dirty white coat, with a look of exhaustion on his face—recommended Vitamin C and said that the boy just needed to rest at home. It wasn't until almost a day and a half later, after I had taken them back to Sancha and then returned to my apartment in Beijing, that I was able to look up *xuexiaoban* in the dictionary: "platelet."

I went online and searched for childhood diseases with low platelet counts and bruising. Leukemia kept coming up. In a panic, I sent e-mails to three doctor friends in the United States, copying Wei Jia's blood-test printout.

The e-mails arrived early the next morning. All three doctors said that leukemia seemed unlikely; independently, they all guessed that it was a condition known as ITP—immune thrombocytopenic purpura. ITP is a disease with unknown causes which is rarely chronic in children; generally, if the patient rests and eats well, it resolves itself within two months. But Wei Jia's platelet count was so dangerously low that there was a risk of bleeding in the brain. "I'd give him steroids or immune globulin," one doctor wrote. My friend Eileen Kavanagh, who was then finishing medical school in New Jersey, responded, "The thing that bothers me the most is that they didn't put him in the hospital to figure all of this out."

I telephoned Sancha, and Cao Chunmei answered. "He's been fine," she said. "But for the last half hour he's had a nosebleed that won't stop."

She put her husband on the phone.

"He's O.K. as long as he's lying down," Wei Ziqi said. "But if he sits up it starts bleeding again."

"He should be in the hospital," I said. "The doctor made a mistake."

I had already called Mimi, who was contacting friends in order to find a better hospital in Beijing. But the only transport available in Sancha was the Weis' motorbike, which was too rough for the boy's condition. I told Wei Ziqi that I'd borrow Mimi's car and drive out to the village.

Wei Ziqi and I had been born exactly two weeks apart, in June of 1969—the Year of the Rooster. One evening in Sancha, we discussed our educational experiences through junior high school, which represented the end of Wei Ziqi's formal education. After comparing the years that we had entered various grades, Wei Ziqi looked at me shrewdly. "Did you flunk?" he asked.

Back in 1974, my parents had referred to it as "being held back," and they had always stressed that I had been undersized rather than stupid—at the age of five, I weighed only thirty-five pounds. But there was no such euphemism in the Chinese spoken by the peasants of Sancha.

"Yes," I said. "I flunked nursery school."

"I figured you must have flunked a year," Wei Ziqi said with a grin.

He was different from the other villagers. His mind was quicker, and he seemed to be the only one who realized that the path of progress might eventually return to Sancha, which stands at the terminus of a dead-end road. Back when Wei Ziqi was born, the road had been nothing more than a dirt track that passed beneath a magnificent entrance gate to the Great Wall. The villagers tore down the gate in the nineteen-seventies, because they wanted to use the stones to build a road out. Not long after they finished the road, people started to leave. Nowadays, a number of houses are uninhabited, and many residents are elderly people who never had the option of going elsewhere. There are still two women, in their eighties, with bound feet.

Even the history of the village seems to have slipped away. There are no official ancient written records in Sancha, although one can find a few lonely paragraphs carved in stone high in the mountains. Along the peaks, which are too remote for villagers to forage in for stones, the Wall is mostly intact. If you follow it eastward, you eventually come to a cracked stone stele lying amid the rubble. The inscription notes that this section of the Wall was completed in the forty-third year of the reign of the Ming-dynasty emperor Wanli—in 1615. But there is no mention of the village, and nobody in Sancha knows for certain when it was first settled.

In the lower section of Sancha, where most residents are named Yan, the early-morning sunlight comes through a gap in the mountains and shines on the last remaining corner of the ruined entrance gate. Our part of the village is situated on a higher shelf—because of the mountains the sun doesn't reach us until late morning. Nearly everybody here is named Wei. Wei Ziqi believes that his ancestors settled here during the nineteenth century, possibly after fleeing a famine in the northern province of Shanxi, but he isn't certain. All he knows is that he is the fifth generation of his family to live in Sancha.

Wei Ziqi is short and barrel-chested, and he rarely talks about the past; his few sentimental streaks run in other directions. He appreciates Sancha's natural beauty; he says that's one reason that he hasn't moved to the city. If I ask about a hike in the mountains, his directions reflect how much of his world is botanical—turn left at the big pine, take a right at the walnut grove. Once, he told me that he wished the villagers hadn't torn down the entrance gate, because it might have attracted visitors. Wei Ziqi is one of the few Sancha residents who collect books; he has more than thirty volumes, many of which are college texts for courses in Chinese law. For somebody like Wei Ziqi—pragmatic as well as literate—law is a natural subject of interest. When Mimi and I first rented the house, Wei Ziqi used one of his books, "Modern Economic Contracts," to draw up a three-page handwritten agreement. He proudly explained the eleven clauses, one of which prohibited the use of the house to "store contraband explosives." The rent was the equivalent of forty dollars a month.

Wei Ziqi farms about an acre of land, and when I first came to know him the Wei family earned about five hundred dollars in the average year. By local standards, their situation was good—they owned a motorbike, a telephone, and a black-and-white TV. But they weren't necessarily satisfied, and Wei Ziqi kept an old blue notebook that he referred to as his "Information." The Information consisted of simple sketched maps, as well as statistics on local altitudes and seasonal temperatures. On one page, he had written ten potential names for a tourist business that he hoped to start in Sancha. They included Mountain Peace and Happiness Village and Sweet Water Farmyard Villa (Sancha is known for having good springwater). Other pages contained long drafts of potential advertisements: "If each household uses a small amount of money and big developers invest, we can change our village into a paradise where tourists can appreciate the plants, climb the Great Wall, and enjoy peasant family meals."

In 2002, Wei Ziqi had his first business cards printed up in Huairou. He settled on a humble name: A Small Post on the Great Wall. The back of the card invited tourists to "return to the simple nature of the past." In recent years, even as rural migration accelerated, upper-class Beijing residents with cars have started taking pleasure trips to the countryside. By the summer of 2002, it seemed that almost every weekend somebody found his way to Sancha, usually by chance. When they saw Wei Ziqi's hand-painted advertisement beside the road, they often stopped at his house for a meal cooked by Cao Chunmei. Wei Ziqi told me that, if he were able to advertise in the cities, he could triple his income.

He liked talking with Mimi and me, and often he asked us about life in America. He was amused by my inability to fix even the simplest electrical or mechanical problem, and he liked the fact that I was a writer. The other villagers were also interested; sometimes I turned around from my computer and

"Very impressive, but our hiring freeze extends to, and includes, even those individuals graced with the tawny thighs of a jungle cat."

saw a peasant standing in my living room, watching in rapt enjoyment. Nobody in Sancha knocks when they visit a neighbor.

I parked the car and walked directly inside. Wei Jia lay on the *kang*, the traditional northern-Chinese brick bed that can be heated by a wood fire. His face was pale, and flecks of blood had dried dark around his nostrils. He didn't say anything when I touched his forehead.

"It's a lot of trouble for you," Cao Chunmei said. She is a heavyset woman with short hair, and usually she has a lovely smile. But now her face was drawn; on the phone she had told me that her son might have a fever. "Will you eat some lunch?" she said politely.

"I already ate," I said. "I think we should go now."

Cao Chunmei had put a change of clothes and a roll of toilet paper in the Mickey Mouse backpack. They had decided that she would stay behind until Wei Jia was settled in the hospital. Wei Ziqi carried him down the hill and put him in the back seat of the car. The boy lay with his head in his father's lap.

The road from the village is steeply switchbacked, and I drove slowly, so the car wouldn't bounce. After ten minutes, Wei Jia said that he felt sick, and I pulled over. He made gagging noises but nothing came up. As soon as he sat up, twin trails of blood trickled down from his nostrils. Wei Ziqi dabbed at them with the toilet paper. We kept driving.

Fall is the best season in northern China, and it was a beautiful clear day. The peasants had come to the final crop of the year, the soybeans, and they were threshing the haylike stalks along the road. I knew that we had an hour of mountain driving before we reached the highway, and I tried to keep calm by concentrating on the details. We came to Nine-Crossings River—the orange-painted rails of the bridge, the white-streaked bark of the waterside poplars. At Black Mountain Stockade, we had to stop again; this time the boy vomited. There was a long descent from the last blue line of the mountains, and then we reached the plain, where the Ming-dynasty emperors are buried. We passed the faded yellow roof of the tomb of Xuande, the fifth Ming ruler. According to legend, he had killed three Mongols with his own bow. Next, we drove by the tomb of his grandfather, Yongle, the great ruler who had moved the capital north from Nanjing to Beijing, in 1421. Just beyond that tomb, Wei Ziqi asked me to stop again.

"I want more than anonymous sex. I want anonymous intimacy."

The boy spat something up and murmured that he had to go to the bathroom. I couldn't tell how much of it was due to car sickness—it's a common ailment among rural people, who are unaccustomed to automobile travel. Wei Ziqi took down the boy's pants, and he produced a sickly stream of diarrhea. He was very pale now, and there was no expression in his eyes. The back of the car was strewn with blood-stained tissues.

"I think we should keep moving," I said.

"Give him a minute," Wei Ziqi said. We stood in a ditch next to a harvested apple orchard; tour buses streamed past on their way to the Ming tombs. I wondered if any tourists noticed the scene: the car with its lights flashing, the father cradling his son. The bare trees in the stark autumn light. The driver in the ditch, waiting.

Wei Jia ran a fever for most of that week. Mimi had arranged for him to be in the children's ward of a Beijing hospital where the blood specialists are supposed to be good. On the fifth day, Wei Jia's temperature reached a hundred and four degrees. His platelet count dipped beneath fifteen thousand—if it went much lower, there was a serious risk of bleeding in the brain.

Mimi and I visited daily, and she generally handled any direct interaction with the doctors. It was safer that way—her spoken Chinese was better than mine, and she didn't look like a foreigner. Nevertheless, there had been some difficulties in dealing with the staff. When we had first arrived at the hospital, after the drive from Sancha, one of the nurses brusquely informed us that Wei Ziqi couldn't stay with his son, because only "female comrades" are allowed to spend the night in the ward. Mimi begged for a one-night exception, because the Weis lived so far away, but the nurse refused. In the end, I had to make another four-hour drive, late that night, to pick up Cao Chunmei.

Chinese hospitals have a reputation for mistreating peasants. Whenever we visited, Mimi and I tried to monitor the boy's care, and we had advised the parents to avoid a transfusion, if possible. The blood supply in China isn't safe; donors are in short supply, and the system relies primarily on people who are paid for giving blood. Testing practices vary widely from region to region, blood bank to blood bank. In China, an estimated one million people have been infected with H.I.V.; the epidemic has been particularly severe in Henan Province, just south of Beijing, because of unsanitary donor conditions. Even in cities like Beijing, hospitals usually rely on antibody tests, which are cheaper and less reliable than the molecular diagnostics used by blood banks in developed countries.

In the evenings, after visiting the hospital, I often e-mailed my doctor friends in the United States with questions. On the morning of the seventh day, the Beijing doctors performed a bone-marrow test for leukemia. Immediately after the procedure, Wei Ziqi telephoned me and asked to borrow eight thousand yuan—nearly a thousand dollars. The doctors had decided that the boy needed a transfusion, which had to be paid for in advance. In China, most peasants have no medical insurance, but the Weis had taken the unusual step of purchasing a private policy when their son entered kindergarten. It would cover about half of his bills, but the money could be claimed only after the fact.

That day, Mimi was preparing to leave on a trip, so I went to the hospital alone. When I arrived, Wei Jia was sleeping fitfully. His mother told me that he had been bleeding from the mouth. Accompanied by Wei Ziqi, I introduced myself to one of the doctors on duty. I asked her if the transfusion was critical.

"Who is this?" she said sharply to Wei Ziqi. "Why is he asking questions?"

"He's a writer," Wei Ziqi said proudly.

"I'm a friend, as I just explained," I said quickly. "I have some simple questions about what we should do."

"This isn't his affair!" the doctor said to Wei Ziqi. "You're the parents, and you have responsibility for the child. He has nothing to do with it."

"I just want to make sure we make the right decision," I said.

"The decision has already been made!" I had assumed that the hospital staff would be patient with me just because I was showing concern for a Chinese child. But now they glared at me: three nurses and two doctors, all women.

"Who can I talk to about this?" I said, but the women ignored me. I repeated the question—silence. Finally, one of the nurses whispered something, and the others laughed. I felt my face turn red.

"It's very simple," I said. "I'm paying for this. I have to know why he needs a transfusion before I pay the money."

One of the doctors, a middle-aged woman named Zhao, turned to me. "He needs immune globulin," she said tersely. "If he doesn't get it, there's a risk that he'll have brain damage from internal bleeding. Already he is bleeding inside his mouth. We know what to do, and you don't understand anything about it."

"I'm trying to understand as much as I can," I said. "If you speak slowly, it helps. I'm only asking these questions because I care about the boy."

"If you care, then let us give him the transfusion."

I asked if it might be better to wait for the test results to come back, but Dr. Zhao said that the lab was too slow. Finally, I asked if there was a risk that the immune globulin might be infected with a disease.

"Of course there's a risk!" she said. "It could be infected with H.I.V. or hepatitis or something else!"

"Don't they test the blood?" I asked.

"You can't test blood completely," she said.

"I think you can, actually."

"Believe me, you can't!"

"Where does the blood come from?"

"How am I supposed to know?" She was practically shouting now. I backed out of the room with Wei Ziqi. I told him that the blood supply was my main concern, and he nodded calmly.

I used my cell phone to call an American I knew who worked in medicine in Beijing. She was familiar with one local organization that followed international testing standards for blood. After checking with the organization, she called back to tell me they could sell a clean unit for three hundred and seventy-eight American dollars. They could have the blood delivered, but I'd have to get the hospital to accept it.

I took a deep breath and walked back into the staff room. "I'm sorry to bother you again," I said to Dr. Zhao. "But if we find guaranteed clean blood can we use that?"

"There's no guaranteed clean blood in Beijing," she said.

I told her that the other organization performs thorough H.I.V. tests.

"There's no test like that," she said.

It sounded like a lie, but I realized that it might simply mean *mei banfa*—nothing can be done. I said, "If I buy clean blood from them and have them deliver it, can we use it?"

"We won't accept it!" she shouted. "It's against hospital policy. Who do you think you are?"

I stepped outside again. At the time, I didn't realize that Dr. Zhao was actually in the right—such a sale of blood was strictly illegal. My American contact also hadn't known. In China, pragmatism often blurs such regulations, and a foreigner can find himself operating in shady territory without even knowing it. I called the American again to see if she had any ideas.

"I know some Chinese doctors who used to work at your hospital," she said. "I'll ask them to check on the blood supply, and then I'll call you back."

I waited in the hospital room with Wei Jia and his parents. During everything that had happened in the past week, they had remained completely calm: no tears, no raised voices. Life in Sancha had taught them that there were limits to what you could control and understand. During my argument with Dr. Zhao, Wei Ziqi had stood in the background, as if it were not his affair. He had a deep respect for my doctor friends in America.

The only decoration in the hospital room was a clock featuring Mickey

Mouse and Donald Duck. There were two other patients: a teen-ager with a heart problem, and an eight-year-old with an ailing kidney. The kidney treatment involved large amounts of hormones, and since June the eight-year-old's weight had increased by fifty per cent. Everything about his body, especially his face, appeared stretched and swollen. My phone rang.

"It's pretty good news," the woman said. She told me that the hospital that was treating Wei Jia used the same blood bank as the medical organization that followed international testing standards. "They haven't ever come up with a positive for H.I.V. That blood bank has been safe so far."

On impulse, I tried to call a doctor friend in San Francisco, but his answering machine clicked on. I stared at my cell phone. "I think it's O.K.," I said finally to Wei Ziqi.

We went downstairs to the hospital's payment division. Clerks sat behind windows, and money was everywhere: strewn across tables, spinning in counting machines, bound into red bricks. From my bag, I took out a thick wad of cash. Without a word, the clerk tossed it into a counting machine.

After the immune globulin was given, Wei Jia's fever broke, and within two days his platelet count was back to normal. It held steady for the rest of the week. The bone-marrow examination showed no leukemia; the doctors decided that the condition was in fact ITP. Five days after the treatment, a group of Wei Jia's relatives came to visit.

There were four men: a grandfather, a great-uncle, an uncle, and a distant cousin named Li Ziwen, a peasant who had joined the military and then moved to the city a few years ago. The rest of the men had come in from the countryside. The great-uncle told me that he hadn't been to Beijing in almost thirty years.

The men gathered around Wei Jia's hospital bed. Cao Jifu, the grandfather, put his hand on the boy's back and spoke softly to him. But the sudden attention had made Wei Jia shy, and he sat in silence at the head of the bed. The sheets had red-brown stains on them from blood tests.

After ten minutes, somebody mentioned lunch. Li Ziwen reached into his pocket and pulled out a wad of bills. He dropped the money onto the bed.

"Use this for the child," he said.

Wei Ziqi tried to give the money back, but Li refused. For a minute, they argued gently, and then Wei nodded his head in thanks.

The uncle was next, and then the grandfather. The great-uncle went last. He was poorer than the others, and his stack included some tens and twenties. The money lay in four bright piles on the sheets. The boy looked very small, and now he leaned back, away from the bills. There was an awkward silence, and finally somebody mentioned lunch again. Cao Chunmei pushed the money out of sight, under the boy's pillow. The men filed out of the room.

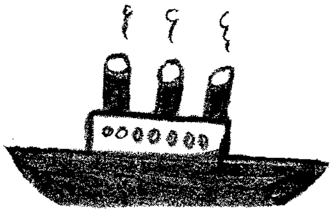
We went to a restaurant across the street. Wei Ziqi studied the menu intently. When the waitress brought a bottle of grain alcohol, he examined the seal. "Can you guarantee that this bottle isn't counterfeit?"

The waitress seemed surprised by the question. "I'm pretty sure," she said. "But I guess I can't say for certain."

Wei Ziqi sent back that bottle, and the next one as well. Finally, the third one satisfied him. When the food arrived, he commented that the iron-plate beef wasn't so good. Carefully, he monitored the dishes, and for a moment I had trouble believing that this was the same man who had stood in the background during the arguments about his son's treatment. But, as a farmer, Wei Ziqi knew food; he was the expert at the restaurant.

The men drank steadily. The grandfather's face was the first to turn red with the grain alcohol. He stood up and gave me a formal toast: "We appreciate all of your help with Wei Jia."

Everybody downed a shot. Wei Ziqi told the story of our drive into Beijing, and the men began discussing the boy's health. Wei Ziqi turned to me. "You know," he said quietly, "I was frightened during that drive."



I told him that I had been scared, too.

Winter is the quietest season in Sancha. There are no crops; apart from some pruning, there is little work in the orchards. The villagers often remain in bed until midmorning, and they eat two meals a day instead of three. Everything slows down.

Wei Jia stayed home from school most of that winter. For two months, he hardly left the house, and his parents were careful with his meals. The doctors gave him a month's worth of steroids. There was a brief period during which Wei Jia whined and cried easily—his parents said that he had learned to act this way from his neighbor in the hospital, the city boy with kidney problems. Whenever Wei Jia cried, his parents mocked him for looking ridiculous, and soon he stopped. Over the winter he gained nine pounds. His father taught him how to write some simple Chinese characters, and together they listened to English-language tapes.

Wei Ziqi kept busy that winter. He enlarged his front porch and part of his home, to prepare for summer tourists, and he made up a new business card. The name changed from A Small Post on the Great Wall to A Post on the Great Wall. Wei Ziqi acquired a cell phone; it didn't work in the village, because the mountains were too high, but he could use it in Huairou, where he increasingly spent time on business—meeting people, buying construction materials. For thirty yuan, he purchased a pair of black leather shoes that he reserved strictly for trips to the city. At home, he kept the shoebox in good condition. A brand name had been printed on the box: "Italy." Later that year, the government agreed to pay the subsidy for the Idiot.

Over the winter, I made a trip back to America, where a friend asked me if I planned to have Wei Jia tested for H.I.V. I knew that I would never suggest such a test, because I didn't trust the hospitals, and the parents would find the request strange. With every step that I took—from the United States to Beijing, from Beijing to the village—familiar rules slipped away. Like everyone else, in a crisis I simply reacted. But after the emergency had passed I sometimes felt an emptiness that reminded me that I was far from home, and that it was not my village, not my child.

Mimi and I returned to Sancha for Qing Ming, the Day of Clear Brightness. It was the first week of April and the apricot trees had just begun to bloom; a thin pink color was brushed across the lower hills. Qing Ming is the Chinese holiday for the dead and is celebrated by tending the tombs of ancestors. In the countryside, it also marks the start of the busy season. In Sancha, only the adult men perform the tomb-sweeping. We awoke at dawn and hiked into the hills behind the village.

Each tomb is nothing more than a mound of dirt, and the villagers cover the piles with fresh earth. Mimi took photographs—because she was an outsider, it was fine for her to come along. The tombs were arranged in neat rows, according to generation, and Wei Ziqi started with a single mound at the back. "This is the Laozu," he said as he shovelled dirt onto the pile. The word means "Old Ancestor." When I asked about the dead man's name, Wei Ziqi shrugged. "I've never heard it," he said. "But he was the first one to be buried here."

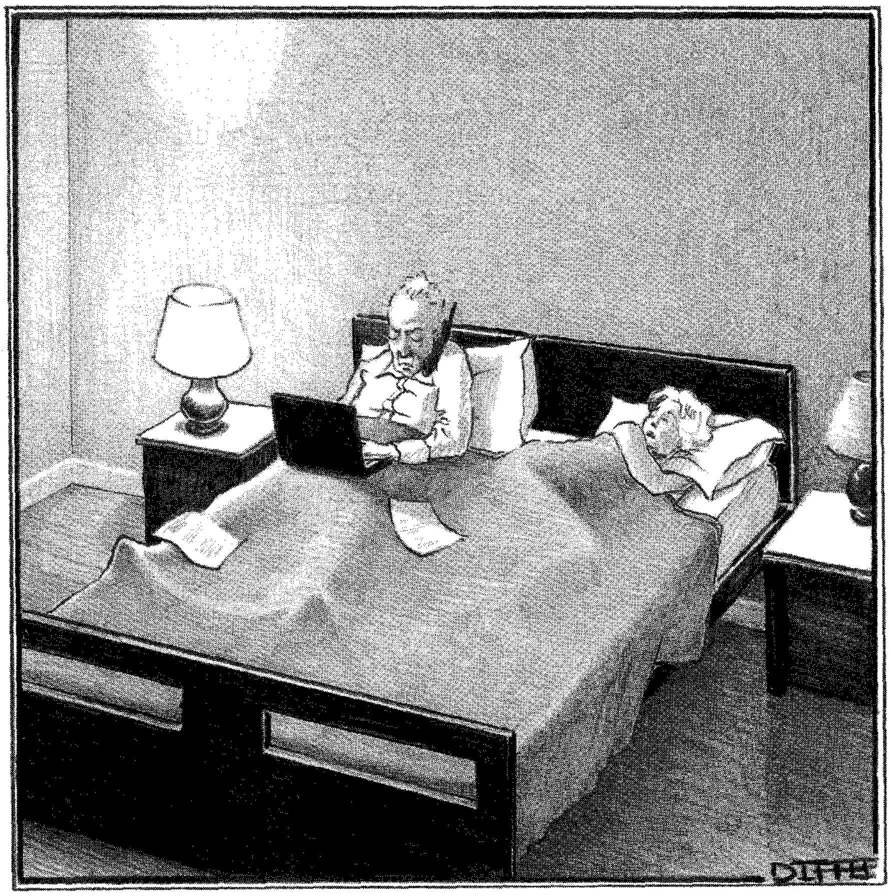
The next line of tombs was the generation of his great-grandparents, and then he heaped dirt onto his grandparents' grave. The men chatted idly while they worked. It was communal: a man took particular care with the tombs of his own ancestors, but everybody added a little dirt to every tomb. After the shovelling, they burned money for the dead to use in the afterlife. The bills looked like official Chinese currency, but they were labelled, in English, "The Bank of Heaven Company, Ltd."

The cemetery had run out of space for Wei Ziqi's parents' generation. We hiked down the mountain to his parents' grave site, which was next to a small plot of farmland. Wei Ziqi paused to examine a tangle of fur that was strewn across the path. "Rabbit," he said. "A hawk got it, probably."

As we walked, I asked him what his father had been like.

"He was a peasant," Wei Ziqi said simply.

I pressed him, asking what he remembered most about his father.



"Honey, you're sleepworking again."

• •

"He liked to play cards," Wei Ziqi said. We continued down the hill. A moment later, he said, "I remember that my father had a bad temper."

That evening, I was finishing dinner with the Weis when a neighbor stopped by and said that his grandson was running a fever. He wanted to go down to the valley to Shayu, twenty minutes away, where there is a small clinic.

I agreed to drive, and we piled into the car that I had rented for the week. Wei Jia sat on his father's lap in the front seat. The sick child, a four-year-old named Huang Hongyu, sat in the back with his grandparents.

At the clinic, a doctor examined the child. He said that the problem wasn't serious, and he prepared to give the boy an injection.

"I have an idea," I said to Wei Jia, pulling him outside. "Do you want to drive the car?"

I put him on my lap, behind the wheel. We pulled away just as the child in the clinic started screaming.

"I don't cry when I get a shot," Wei Jia said.

We made a loop around the village. By the time we returned, the rest of them were ready to leave. Huang Hongyu had calmed down, and the grandparents seemed relieved at the doctor's words. Halfway back to Sancha, I allowed Wei Jia to sit on my lap again. He held the wheel tightly as we took the switchbacks up the mountain. The boy in the back was carsick and began to vomit.

"Do you want me to stop?" I asked.

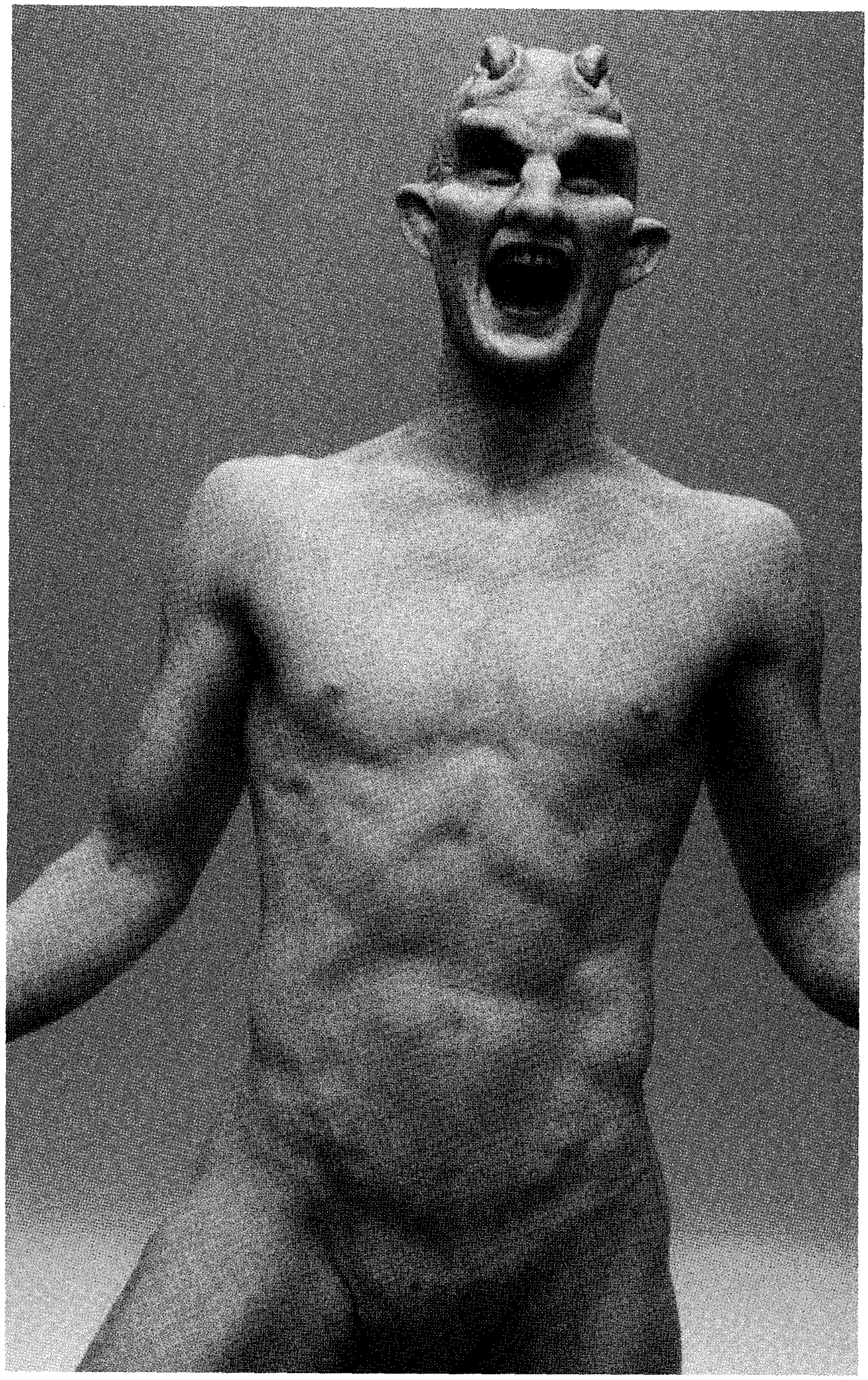
"It's not necessary," the grandfather said. He had come prepared with plastic bags.

I rolled down the window and kept driving. We came to the lower village, and Wei Jia leaned forward in order to see more clearly. Electric lights glowed a soft orange against the brick of the homes, and then, high above, there was a dark line where the mountains gave way to stars and the great emptiness. The boy in the back had stopped throwing up. I kept telling myself that the children were fine and we were almost home. ♦

FICTION

SUPER GOAT MAN

BY JONATHAN LETHEM



When Super Goat Man moved into the commune on our street, I was ten years old. Though I liked superheroes, I wasn’t familiar with Super Goat Man. His presence didn’t mean much to me or to the other kids in the neighborhood. For us, as we ran and screamed and played our secret games on the sidewalk, Super Goat Man was only another of the guys who sat on stoops in sleeveless undershirts on hot summer days, watching the slow progress of life on the block. The two little fleshy horns on his forehead didn’t make him especially interesting. We weren’t struck by his fall from grace, out of the world of comic-book heroes, among which he had been at best a minor star, to land here in Cobble Hill, Brooklyn, in a single room in what was basically a dorm for college dropouts, a hippie group shelter, any more than we were by the tufts of extra hair at his throat and behind his ears. We had eyes only for Spider-Man and Batman in those days, superheroes in two dimensions, with lunchboxes and television shows and theme songs. Super Goat Man had none of those.

It was our dads who cared. They were unmistakably drawn to the strange figure who’d moved to our block, as though for them he represented some lost possibility in their own lives. My father in particular seemed fascinated with Super Goat Man, though he disguised this interest by acting as though it was on my behalf. One day toward the end of that summer, he and I walked to Montague Street to visit the comics shop there. This was a tiny storefront filled with long white boxes packed with carefully archived comics, protected by plastic bags and cardboard backing. The boxes contained ancient runs of back issues of titles I’d heard of, as well as thousands of other comics featuring characters I’d never encountered. The shop was presided over by a nervous young pedant with long hair and a beard, a collector type himself, an old man in spirit who distrusted children in his store, as he ought to have. He helped my father to find what he sought, deep in the alphabetical archive: a five-issue run of *The Remarkable Super Goat Man*, from Electric Comics. These were the only comics in which Super Goat Man had appeared. There were just five issues because after five the title had been forever cancelled. My father seemed satisfied with what he’d found. We paid for the five issues and left.

I didn’t know how to explain to my father that Electric wasn’t one of the major comics publishers. The stories the comics contained, when we inspected them together, were both ludicrous and boring. Super Goat Man’s five issues showed him rescuing old ladies from swerving trucks and kittens from lightning-struck trees, and battling dull villains like Vest Man and False Dave. The drawings were amateurish, cut-rate, antiquated. I couldn’t have articulated these judgments then, of course. I knew only that I disliked the comics, found them embarrassing, for myself, for Super Goat Man, and for my dad. They languished in my room, unread, and were eventually cleaned up—I mean, thrown out—by my mom.

For the next few years, Super Goat Man was less than a minor curiosity to me. I didn’t waste thought on him. The younger men and women who lived in the commune took him for granted, as anyone should have, so far as I knew. We kids would see him in their company, moving furniture up the stoop and into the house—discarded dressers and couches and lamps they’d found on the street—or taping up posters on lampposts announcing demonstrations against nuclear power or in favor of day-care centers, or weeding in the commune’s pathetic front yard, which was intended as a vegetable garden but was choked not only with uninvited growth but with ice-cream wrappers and soda bottles—we kids used the commune’s yard as a dumping ground. It didn’t occur to me that Super Goat Man was much older, really, than the commune’s other occupants, that in fact they might be closer to my age than to his. However childish their behavior, the hippies all seemed as dull and remote as grownups to me.

It was the summer when I was thirteen that my parents allowed me to accompany them to one of the commune’s potluck dinners. The noise and vibrancy of that house’s sporadic celebrations were impossible to ignore on our street, and I knew that my parents had attended a few earlier parties—warily, I imagined. The inhabitants of the commune were always trying to sweep their neighbors into dubious causes, and it might be a mistake to be seduced by frivolity into some sticky association. But my parents liked fun, too. And had too little of it. Their best running jokes concerned the dullness of their friends’ dinner parties. This midsummer evening, they brought me along to see inside the life of the scandalous, anomalous house.

The house was already full, many of the guests bearded and jewelled and scruffy, reeking of patchouli and musk, others, like my parents, dressed in their hippest collarless shirts and paisley blouses, wearing their fattest beads and bracelets. The offerings, nearly all casseroles brimming with exotic gray proteins—beans and tofu and eggplant and more I couldn’t name—were lined up on a long side table, mostly ignored. This was a version of cocktail hour, with beer drunk from the bottle and well-rolled marijuana cigarettes. I didn’t see whether my parents indulged in the latter. My mother accepted a glass of orange juice, surely spiked. I meant not to pay them any attention, so I moved for the stairs. There were partyers leaning on the bannister at the first landing, and music was playing in upstairs rooms, so I didn’t doubt that the whole house was open to wandering.

There was no music coming from the garden-facing room on the second floor, but the door was open and three figures were visible inside, seated on cushions on a mattress on the floor: a young couple and Super Goat Man. From his bare hairy feet on the mattress, I guessed that it was his room I’d entered. The walls were sparse apart from a low bookcase, on which I spotted, laid crosswise in the row of upright spines, Norman Mailer’s “Armies of the Night,” Sergei Eisenstein’s “Film Form/The Film Sense,” and Thomas Pynchon’s “V.” The three titles stuck in my head; I would later attempt to read all three in college, succeeding only with the Mailer. Next to the bookcase was a desk heaped with papers, and behind it a few black-and-white postcards had been thumbtacked to the wall. One of the postcard images I recognized as Charlie Parker, clutching a saxophone with his meaty hands. The jazzman was an idol of my father’s, perhaps a symbol of his vanished youth.

The young man on the mattress was holding a book: “Memories, Dreams, Reflections,” by Carl Jung. Super Goat Man had evidently just pressed it on him, and had likely been extolling its virtues when I walked into the room.

“Hello,” the young woman said, her

MATTHEW BARNEY, “DRAWING RESTRAINT 7” (1993)/PHOTO MICHAEL JAMES O’BRIEN/COURTESY BARBARA GLADSTONE

voice warm. I must have been staring from my place in the middle of the room.

“You’re Everett, aren’t you?” Super Goat Man said, before I could speak.

“How’d you know my name?”

“You live on the block,” Super Goat Man said. “I’ve seen you running around.”

“I think we’ll head down, Super Goat Man,” the young man said abruptly, tucking the book under his arm as he got up from the mattress. “Get something to eat before it’s too late.”

“I want to hit the dance floor,” the young woman said.

“See you down there,” Super Goat Man said. With that, the young couple were gone.

“You checking out the house?” Super Goat Man said once we were alone. “Casing the joint?”

“I’m looking for my friend,” I lied.

“I think some kids are hanging out in the back yard.”

“No, she went upstairs.” I wanted him to think I had a girlfriend.

“O.K., cool,” Super Goat Man said. He smiled. I suppose he was waiting for me to leave, but he didn’t give any sign that I was bothering him by staying.

“Why do you live here?” I asked.

“These are my friends,” he said. “They helped me out when I lost my job.”

“You’re not a superhero anymore, are you?”

Super Goat Man shrugged. “Some people felt I was being too outspoken about the war. Anyway, I wanted to accomplish things on a more local level.”

“Why don’t you have a secret identity?”

“I wasn’t that kind of superhero.”

“But what was your name before?”

“Ralph Gersten.”

“What did Ralph Gersten do?”

“He was a college teacher, for a couple of years.”

“So why aren’t you Ralph Gersten now?”

“Sometime around when they shot Kennedy I just realized that Ralph Gersten wasn’t who I was. He was a part of an old life I was holding on to. So I became Super Goat Man. I’ve come to understand that this is who I am, for better or worse.”

This was a bit much for me to assimilate, so I changed the subject. “Do you smoke pot?”

“Sometimes.”

“Were Mr. and Mrs. Gersten sad when you gave up your secret identity?”

“Who?”

“Your parents.”

Super Goat Man smiled. “They weren’t my real parents. I was adopted.”

COMPLAINTS
CONSTRUCTIVE CRITICISM

Suddenly I was done. “I’m going downstairs, Super Goat Man.”

“O.K., Everett,” he said. “See you down there, probably.”

I made my way downstairs to the commune’s muddy and ill-lit back yard, milling with the other teen-agers and children stranded there by the throngs of frolickers—for the party was now overflowing its bounds, and we were free to steal beers from the counter and carry on our own tentative party, our own fumbling flirtations. I had no girlfriend, but I did play spin the bottle that night, crouched on the ground beneath a fig tree.

Then, near midnight, I went back inside. The living room was jammed with bodies—dancers on a parquet floor that had been revealed when the vast braided rug was rolled up against the base of the mantelpiece. Colored Christmas lights were bunched in one corner, and some of them blinked to create a gently eerie strobe. I smelled sweat and smoke. Feeling perverse and thrilled by the kisses I’d exchanged in the mud beneath the tree, I meandered into the web of celebrants.

Super Goat Man was there. He was dancing with my mother. She was as I’d never seen her, braceleted wrists crossed above her head, swaying to the reggae—I think it was the soundtrack to “The Harder They Come.” Super Goat Man was more dressed up than he’d been in his room upstairs. He wore a felt brocade vest and striped pants. He danced in tiny little steps, as though losing and regaining his balance, his arms loose at his sides, fingers snapping. Mostly he moved his head to the beat, shaking it back and forth as if saying no-no-no, no-no-no. He shook his head at my mother’s dancing, as if he couldn’t approve of the way she was moving but couldn’t quit paying attention, either.

My father? He was seated on the rolled-up rug, his back against the mantelpiece, elbows on his knees, dangling with forefinger and thumb a nearly empty paper cup of red wine. Like me, he was watching my mom and Super Goat Man. It didn’t look as if it bothered him at all.

My junior year at Corcoran College, in Corcoran, New Hampshire, Super Goat Man was brought in to fill the Walt Whitman Chair in the Humanities. This was 1981, the dawn of

Reagan. The chair was required to teach one course; Super Goat Man's was listed in the catalogue as "Dissidence and Desire: Marginal Heroics in American Life, 1955-1975." The reading list included Franz Fanon, Roland Barthes, and Timothy Leary. It was typical of Corcoran that it would choose that particular moment to recuperate a figure associated with sixties protest, to enshrine what had once been at the vigorous center of the culture in the harmless pantheon of academia. It was Super Goat Man's first teaching job since the fifties. The commune on our street had shut down at some point in my high-school years, and I don't know where Super Goat Man had been in the intervening time. I certainly hadn't thought about him since departing for college.

He'd gained a little weight, but was otherwise unchanged. I first spotted him moving across the Commons lawn on a September afternoon, the scent of fallen and fermenting crab apples on the breeze. It was one of those rare, sweet days on either side of the long New Hampshire winter, when the school year was either falsely fresh before its plunge into bleak December or exhausted and ready to give way to summer. Super Goat Man wore a forest-green corduroy suit and a wide salmon tie, but his feet were still bare. A couple of Corcoran girls trailed alongside him. He had a book open as he walked—perhaps he was reading them a poem.

The college had assigned Super Goat Man a dormitory apartment—a suite of rooms built into Sweeney House, one of the student residences. That is to say, he lived on the edge of the vast Commons lawn, and we students felt his watchful presence much as I had on our street in Brooklyn. I didn't take Super Goat Man's class, which was full of freshmen and those renegade history and rhetoric majors who'd been seduced by French strains of philosophy and literary theory. I fancied myself a classics scholar then—though I'd soon divert into a major in history—and wasn't curious about contemporary political theory; nor did I believe Super Goat Man to be a superior teacher. I wasn't certain that he had nothing to offer the Corcoran students, but whatever he did have to offer it wasn't summed up by the title of his class.

I did, however, participate in one of the late-night salons in the living room of Sweeney House. Super Goat Man had begun appearing there casually, showing up after a few students had occupied the couches and lit a fire or opened a bottle of red wine. Increasingly, his presence was relied upon; soon he was the center of an unnamed tradition. Though Corcoran College was then in the midst of a wave of glamorous eighties-style binge parties, and cocaine had begun to infiltrate our sanctum in the New Hampshire woods, the Sweeney House salons were a return to an earlier temperature of college socializing. Bearded art students who disdained dancing in favor of bull sessions, Woolfian-Plathian girls in long vintage dresses, and lonely gay virgins of both genders—these were the types who found their way to Sweeney to sit at Super Goat Man's feet. There were also, from what I observed, a handful of quiet superhero-comic-book fans who revered Super Goat Man in that capacity and were covertly basking in his aura, ashamed to ask the sorts of questions I'd peppered him with in his room in the communal house so long ago.

The evening I sat in, Super Goat Man had dragged his phonograph out from his apartment and set it up in the living room so that he could play Lenny Bruce records for his acolytes. He spoke intermittently, his voice unhurried and reflective, explaining the context of the famous comedian's arrests and courtroom battles before dropping the needle on a given track. After a while, conversation drifted to other subjects. Cross talk arose, though whenever Super Goat Man began to speak, in his undemonstrative way, all fell deferentially silent. Then Super Goat Man went into his apartment and brought out an Ornette Coleman LP.

"You know a bit about jazz, don't you, Everett?" It was the first time he'd addressed me directly. I hadn't known he'd recognized me.

"A thing or two, I guess."

"Everett's father was the one who turned me on to Rahsaan Roland Kirk," Super Goat Man told a teen-ager I recognized, a bespectacled sophomore who'd impressively talked his way into a classics seminar that was meant for upperclassmen. "I always thought that stuff was too gimmicky, but I'd never really listened."

I tried to imagine when Super Goat Man and my dad had spent so much time together. It was almost impossible to picture, but Super Goat Man didn't have any reason to be lying about it. It was one of the first times I was forced to consider the possibility that my parents had social lives—that they had lives.

"Does your father write about jazz?" the sophomore asked me, wide-eyed. I suppose he'd misunderstood Super Goat Man's remark. There were plenty of famous—or at least interesting—fathers at Corcoran College, but mine wasn't one of them.

"My father works for New York State," I said. "Department of Housing and Urban Development. Well, he just lost his job, in fact."

"He's a good five-card-stud player, too," said Super Goat Man. "Cleaned me out a few times, I don't mind saying."

"Oh, yeah, my dad's a real supervillain," I said with the heaviest sarcasm I could muster. I was embarrassed to think of my father sucking up to Super Goat Man, as he surely had during their long evenings together, whoever had taken the bulk of the chips.

Then the squeaky jazz began playing, and Super Goat Man, though seated in one of the dormitory's ratty armchairs, closed his eyes and began shaking his head as if transported back to the commune's dance floor, or perhaps to some even earlier time. I studied his face. The tufts around his ears and throat were graying. I puzzled over his actual age. Had Super Goat Man once spent decades frozen in a block of ice, like Captain America? If Ralph Gersten had been a college teacher in the fifties, he was probably older than my dad.

Eight months later, the campus was green again. The term was almost finished, all of us nearly freed to summer, when it happened: the incident at the Campanile. A Saturday, late in a balmy night of revels, the Commons lawn full of small groups crossing from dorm to dorm, cruising the parties that flared like bonfires in the landscape of the campus. Many of us still owed papers, others would have to sit in a final class the following Monday, but the mood was one of expulsive release from our labors. It was nearly three in the morning when Rudy Krugerrand and Seth Brummell, two of the wealthiest and most widely reviled frat boys at Corcoran, scaled the Campanile and began bellowing.

I was among those awake and near enough by to be drawn by the commotion into the small crowd at the dark base of the Campanile tower. When I first gazed up at Rudy and Seth, I was confused by what I saw: were there four figures spotlit against the clock beneath the bells? And where were the campus authorities? It was as though this night had been officially ceded to some bacchanalian imperative.

That spring, a sculpture student had, as his thesis project, decorated the Commons with oversized office supplies—a stapler in the dimensions of a limousine, a log painted as a No. 2 pencil, and a pile of facsimile paper clips, each the height of a human being, fashioned out of plastic piping and silver paint. I suppose the work was derivative of Claes Oldenburg, but the result made an impressive spectacle. It was two of the paper-clip sculptures that Rudy Krugerrand and Seth Brummell had managed to attach to their belts like mannequin dance partners and drag with them out onto the ledge of the Campanile clock, where they stood now, six stories from the ground. Their faces uplit in the floodlights, Rudy and Seth were almost like players in the climax of some gothic silent-film drama, but they didn't have the poise or imagination to know it. They were only college pranksters, reeling drunk, Seth with a three-quarters-empty bottle of Jack Daniel's still in his hand, and at first it was hard to make out what they were shouting. We on the ground predictably shouted "Jump!" back at them, knowing that they loved themselves too dearly ever to consider it.

Then Rudy Krugerrand's slurred voice rose above the din—or perhaps it was only that I picked it out of the din for the first time. "Calling Super Goat Man! Calling Super Goat Man!" He shouted this until his voice broke hoarse. "This looks like a job for Super Goat Man! Come out, come out, wherever you are!"

"What's going on?" I asked a student beside me.

He shrugged. "I guess they're calling out Super Goat Man. They want to see if he can get them down from the ledge."

"What do you mean?"

"They want to see him use his powers."

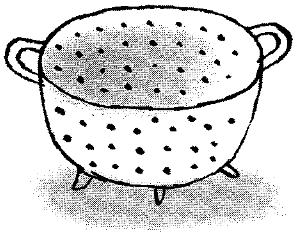
From the clock tower, Seth Brummell screamed now, in a girlish falsetto, "Oh, Super Goat Man, where are you?"

A stirring had begun in the crowd, which had grown to a hundred or more. A murmuring. Under the guise of concern for Rudy and Seth, but certainly with a shiver of voyeuristic anticipation, some had begun to speak of going to the Sweeney House apartment to see if Super Goat Man could be found. There was a hint of outrage: Why wasn't he here already? What kind of Super Goat Man was he, anyway?

Now a group of fifteen or twenty broke out and streamed down the hill toward Sweeney House. Others trailed after them, myself included. I hid in the crowd, feeling like an observer, though I suppose I was as complicit as anyone. Were we only curious, or part of a mob? It seemed, anyway, that we were under the direction of Rudy and Seth.

"That's right," mocked Rudy. "Only Super Goat Man can save us now!"

Those who'd led the charge hammered on Super Goat Man's apartment door for a good few minutes before getting a result. Bold enough to have woken him, they inched backward at the sight of him on his threshold, dressed only in a flowery silk kimono, blinking groggily at the faces arrayed on the hill. Then someone stepped forward, took his arm, and pointed him toward the Campanile. Any conversation was drowned by the sound of sirens, as the campus police belatedly pulled up to the tower. Super Goat Man shook his head sorrowfully, but he began the trek up the hill toward the Campanile. We all fell in around and behind him, emboldened at marching to the beat of a superhero's step, feeling the pulse of the script that it now appeared would be played out, and ignoring the fact that it had been written by Rudy and Seth and Jack Daniel's. Super Goat Man's kimono fluttered slightly, not quite a cape. He tightened the sash, then strode, rubbing at his eyes with balled fists.



This success seemed only to enrage Rudy and Seth, who writhed and scorned from atop their perch. "Baaahh, baaahh, Super Goat Man!" they roared. "What's the matter with your goaty senses? Smoke too much dope tonight? Fuck you, Super Goat Man!" Seth lifted his giant paper clip above his head and shook it like a fake strongman's prop barbell.

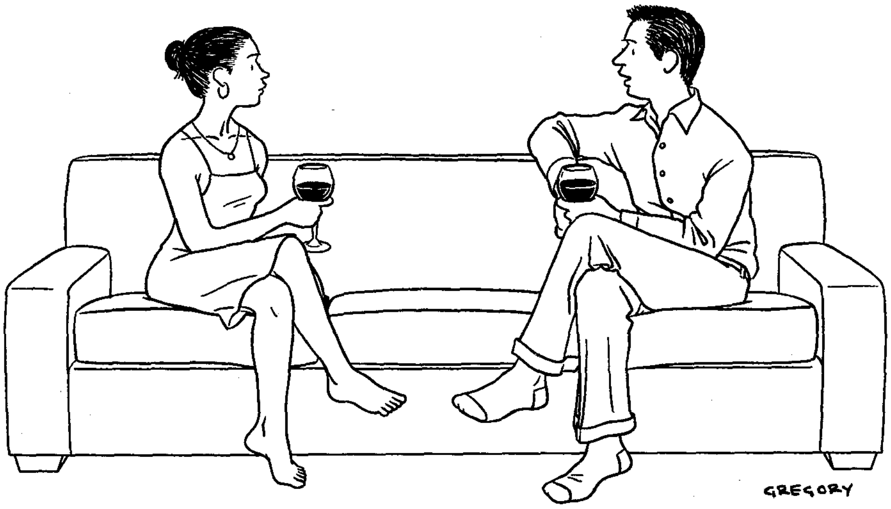
The campus police had begun to herd the students away from the base of the tower, but our arriving throng pushed the opposite way. In the confusion, the young policemen seemed utterly helpless, and fell back. Straining on tiptoe to see over the heads of the crowd, I followed the progress of the lime-green kimono as Super Goat Man was thrust to the fore, not necessarily by his own efforts. Above, Seth was strumming air-guitar chords on his paper clip, then waggling it over our heads like an enormous phallus.

"Bite my crank, Super Goat Man!"

The crowd gasped as Super Goat Man shed his garb—for mobility, I suppose—and started shimmying, almost scampering, up the face of the tower. His pelt was glossy in the moonlight, but nobody could have mistaken the wide streak of white above his dusky buttocks for sheen. Super Goat Man was aging. He scurried through the leaf-blobby shade that a tree branch cast against the side of the tower, then back into the light. Whether it was the pressure of expectation on a still sleepy mind or possibly a genuine call to heroics, a hope that he could do some good here, Super Goat Man had taken the bait. His limbs worked miraculously as he ascended the tower, yet one could only dread what would happen if he reached the idiot boys at the top, who were growing more agitated and furious with every inch he achieved. Rudy had lifted his own paper clip, to match Seth, and now he swung it out over us.

The plummet silenced us. It was over before we could swallow our words and form a cry to replace them. Six stories is no distance at all. Rudy's paper clip had overbalanced him. Super Goat Man had braced three limbs, and reached out with a fourth—some of us saw, others only imagined afterward—but he didn't come away with Rudy. Super Goat Man caught the paper clip in mid-flight with the prehensile toes of his left foot, and

THE ROAD FROM INCARCERATION BACK
TO CIVILIZATION CAN BE ROCKY



"I'm so glad you like the wine—I made it in my toilet."

the sculpture was jerked free from Rudy as he fell. That's how firm was Super Goat Man's hold on the tower's third story: it was left for later to speculate whether he might have been able to halt a human body's fall. Rudy came to earth, shattering at the feet of the policemen there at the tower's base. Now the nude furry figure could only undertake a sober, methodical descent, paper clip tucked beneath one arm. At the clockface, Seth Brummell was mute, clinging to a post, waiting for the security men who would soon unlock the small door in the tower behind him and angrily yank him to safety.

Rudy Krugerrand survived his fall. It cost him the use of his legs, cost him all feeling below some point at his middle. Only a junior, he rather courageously reappeared in a motorized wheelchair the following September, resumed his studies, resumed drinking, too, though his temperament had mellowed. He'd be seen at parties dozing in the corner after the dance floor had filled—it took very little beer to knock his dwindled body out. If Rudy had died, or never returned, the incident likely would have been avidly discussed, etched into campus legend. Instead it was covered in a clumsy hush. The coexistence in the same small community of Rudy and Super Goat Man—who'd been offered a seat in the social sciences, and accepted—created a kind of odd, insoluble puzzle: Had the hero failed the crisis? Caused it, by some innate provocation? Or was the bogus crisis unworthy, and the outcome its own reward? Who'd shamed whom?

I contemplated this koan, or didn't, for just another year. My graduate studies took me to the University of California, Irvine, three thousand grateful miles from Corcoran. I didn't see Super Goat Man or think of him again for more than a decade.

The sweetest student I ever had was an Italian girl named Angela Verucci. Tall, bronze-skinned, with a quizzical, slightly humorless cast, dressed no matter the weather in neat pants suits or skirts with stockings, she wore heavy tortoiseshell eyeglasses and kept her blond hair knit in a tight, almost Japanese bun. She had an aura of seriousness and a Mediterranean lustre that outshone to near-invisibility the blandly corn-fed and T-shirted students in whose midst she had materialized. Angela Verucci was not so much a girl, really: twenty-four years old, she'd studied at Oxford before winning the Reeves Fellowship that brought her to America. She spoke immaculate English, and though her accreditation was a mess, she was nearly as accomplished a medievalist as I was the day she appeared in my class. This was at Oregon State University, in Corvallis, where I'd been given a two-year postdoc after my six years at Irvine. Oregon State was the third stop in Angela Verucci's American tour—she'd spent a year at Columbia and, as it happened, a term at Corcoran.

What does a single thirty-year-old history professor do with the sweetest student he's ever had? He waits until the end of the semester, then he asks her out. We were married two years later.

I was at Rutgers by then, on a second postdoc, and hungry for a tenure-track position. My job interviews weren't exactly unsuccessful: I was never summarily dismissed. Instead I was always called back for second and third visits, always asked to teach a sample class. Afterward, polite notes flew back and forth, candidate and committee reassuring each other of how fine the experience had been, how glad we both were to have met. Only I never got a job.

By the time I got the invitation to interview for a position at Corcoran, the New England pastures of my alma mater didn't look like such a poor fate. It was the week of Halloween, the weather glorious, so at the very least the day of the interview would be a nice jaunt. We left early, to roam a few New Hampshire back roads, then ate a picnic lunch beside Corcoran Pond before I checked in for an afternoon of meetings.

Corcoran looked implacable, though I knew it was changed. The school had been through financial shakeups and tenure scandals that had, in turn, purged most of the administrators and faculty I'd known. But the grounds, the crabapple trees and white clapboard, were as eternal as a country-store calendar. While Angela took a memory tour, heading for her old dorm, I showed up for my scheduled tribunal. There I was debriefed by peers, a couple of them younger than myself. The room was full of the usual tensions: some of these people had an investment in my candidacy, some had bets on other tables. No one was in the least sentimental about my status as an alumnus—that was reserved, I supposed, for the dinner that night, arranged in my honor at the President's House. After a final round of polite handclasps, I was ferried to the president's office for a private meeting. I figured this was a good sign.

The president asked how I felt about the interview; we made this and other small talk. She asked about my years at Corcoran, which I painted in rosy tones. Then she said, "Did you know Super Goat Man when you were a student here?"

"Sure," I said. "I mean, I never took a class with him."

"He surprised me by asking to join us at the dinner tonight—he doesn't usually bother with faculty socializing anymore."

"He's still here?" I was amazed that Super Goat Man, of all people, had threaded his way through so many personnel shakeups.

"Yes, though he's reduced to a kind of honorary presence. He doesn't actually teach now. I don't know if he'd be capable of it. But he's beloved. The students joke that he can be spotted strolling across Commons lawn twice a semester. And that if you want to get any time with him you can join him on the stroll."

"He recognized my name?"

"He seemed to, yes. You should prepare yourself. He's quite infirm."

"How—how old is he?"

"Measured in years, I don't know. But there's been an accelerated aging process. You'll see."

Perhaps superheroism was a sort of toxin, like a steroid, one with a punitive cost to the body. I mused on this as I crossed the Commons and headed through the parking lot and downhill to find the bench beside Corcoran Creek, a favorite spot, where Angela had said she'd wait. I saw my wife before she saw me, her feet tucked up on the slats, abandoned shoes beneath, her body curled around a big hardback biography of Rousseau. In the distance, dying October light drew long saddle-shaped curves on the White Mountains of New Hampshire. Suddenly, I could picture us here for a long time, and picture it happily.

"How did it go?" she asked when she noticed me.

"Par: two friends, two enemies, one sleeper."

"And the president?"

"Nice, but she wasn't giving anything away."

She closed the book. "You seem distant," she said. "Memories?"

"Yes." In fact, I was thinking about Super Goat Man. I'd never before considered the sacrifice he'd made by enunciating his political views so long ago. Fruitlessly, it seemed to me. What had he gained in exchange for his iconic, trapped-in-amber status? Had Super Goat Man really accomplished much outside the parameters of his comics? However unglamorous the chores, didn't kittens need rescuing from trees? Didn't Vest Man require periodic defeating? Why jettison Ralph Gersten if in the end all you attained was the life of a campus mascot?

I wanted to convey some of this to Angela, but didn't know where to begin. "When you were here," I said, "did you know Super Goat Man?"

I saw her stiffen. "Of course. Everybody knew him," she said.

"He's still here." I watched her as I spoke. Her gaze dipped to the ground.

"You saw him?"

"No, but we will at dinner tonight."

"How . . . unexpected." Now Angela was the one in fugue.

"Did you study with him?"

"He rarely taught. I attended a few talks."

"I thought you didn't like that stuff."

She shrugged. "I was curious."

I waited to understand. Crickets had begun a chorus in the grass. Soon we'd need to visit our off-campus bed-and-breakfast, to change into fresh clothes for the dinner party. Ordinarily such gatherings were clumsy at best, with grudges incompletely smothered under the surface of the talk, among tenured faculty who knew one another far too well. Something in me now curdled at the prospect of this one. In fact, I'd begun to dread it.

"Everett." There was something Angela wanted to tell me.

I made a preëmptive guess. "Did you have some sort of thing with Super Goat Man?" This was how she and I blundered through each other's past liaisons—we'd never been systematic.

"Just an—affair. Nothing."

"What's nothing?"

She shrugged, and flipped her fingers as though dispelling a small fog. "We fooled around a few times. It was stupid."

I felt the poison of bitterness leach into my bloodstream. "I don't know why, but I find that totally disgusting."

"Oh, Everett." Angela raised her arms, moved to assuage me, knowing as she did my visceral possessiveness, the bolt of jealousy that shot through me when contemplating her real past, anytime it arose. Of course she couldn't understand my special history with Super Goat Man. How could she if I didn't? I'd never even mentioned him.

"I was a silly girl." She spoke gently. "And I didn't know you yet."

Unsatisfied, I wished her to declare that the encounter had been abusive, an ethical violation. Not that I had any ground to stand on. Anyway, she was Italian in this, as in all things. It was just an affair.

"Do you want to skip the dinner?"

She scowled. "That's unnecessary. He wouldn't even remember. And I don't care. It's really nothing, my darling. My love."

At the president's house, Super Goat Man was the last to arrive, so I was allowed briefly to fantasize that I'd been spared. The sight, when he did come in, was startling. He'd not only aged but shrunk—I doubted if he was even five feet tall. He was, as ever, barefoot, and he wore white muslin pajamas with purple piping. The knees of the pajama bottoms were smudged with mud. As he entered the room, creeping in amid us as we stood with our cocktail glasses, I quickly saw the reason for the smudges: as Super Goat Man's rickety steps faltered, he dropped briefly to all fours. There, on the ground, he shook himself, like a wet dog. Then he rose again, on palsied limbs.

No one took notice of this. The guests, the other faculty, were inured, polite. In this halting manner, Super Goat Man made his way past us to the dining room. Apparently he wasn't capable of mingling, or even necessarily of speech. He took a seat at the long table, his bunched face, his squinting eyes and wrinkled horns, nearly at the level of his place setting. We began drifting in behind him, almost guiltily. The president's husband showed us to our places, which had been carefully designated, though an accommodation was evidently being made for Super Goat Man, who'd plopped down where he liked and wasn't to be budged. I was at the right hand of the president, and the left of the chair of the hiring committee. Another good sign. Angela sat across from me, Super Goat Man many places away, at the other end of the table.

I actually managed to forget him for the duration of the meal. He was, so far as I could tell, silent at his feed, and the women on either side of him turned to their other partners or conversed across the width of the table. Toward the end, we were served Cognac and dessert, and the president's husband passed around cigars, which he bragged were Cuban. Some of the women fled their chairs to avoid the smoke; other guests rose and mingled in the corners of the room. It was in this interval of disarrangement that Super Goat Man pushed himself off his chair and made his way to the seat at my left, which the president had vacated. He had to collapse to his knees only once on the way, and he offered no evidence of sacrificed dignity as he rose from the floor.

Angela remained in her seat. Unlike any of the American women, she'd accepted a cigar, and now leaned it into the flame of a lighter proffered by an older professor she'd been entertaining throughout the meal. Her eyes found mine as Super Goat Man approached. Her expression was curious, and not unsympathetic.

Super Goat Man prodded my arm with a finger. I turned and considered him. Black pupils gleamed behind a hedge of eyebrows. His resplendent tufts had thinned and spread—the hair of his face had been redistributed, to form a merciful gauze across his withered features.

"I . . . knew . . . your . . . father." His voice was mossy, sepulchral.

"Yes," I said simply, keeping my voice low. No one was paying any attention to us, yet, apart from Angela.

"You . . . remember . . . ?"

"Of course."

"We . . . love . . . jazz . . ."

I wondered whether he meant my father or, somehow, me. I had in fact over the years come around to my father's love of jazz, though my preference was not so much Ornette Coleman and Rahsaan Roland Kirk as Duke Ellington and Fletcher Henderson.

". . . poker . . ."

"He cleaned you out," I reminded him.

"Yezz . . . good times . . . beautiful women . . ." He struggled, swallowed hard, blinked. "All this controversy . . . not worth it . . ."

"My father was never involved in any controversy," I heard myself say, though I knew Super Goat Man was speaking only of himself, his lost career.

"No . . . absolutely true . . . knew how to live . . ."

Angela had leaned back, pursing her lips to savor the cigar. I might have noticed that the room's gabble of conversation had dampened somewhat—might have noticed sooner, I mean.

"So . . . many . . . hangovers . . ."

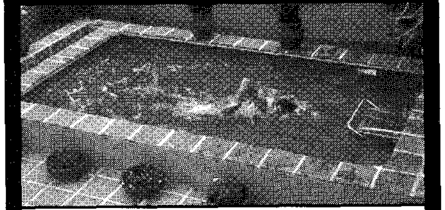
"But you and I have something in common besides my father," I told Super Goat Man.

"Yezz . . . yezz . . . ?"

"Of course we do," I began, and though I now understood that we had the attention of the entire room, that the novelty of Super Goat Man's reminiscences had drawn every ear, I found myself unable to quit before I finished the thought. Further, having gained their attention, I allowed my voice to rise to a garrulous, plummy tone, as if I were starring in dinner theatre. Before the line was half out of my mouth, I knew that the words, by airing the sort of laundry so desperately repressed in a community as precious as Corcoran, damned my candidacy. But that was a prize I no longer sought. Broader repercussions I could only guess at. My wife's eyes were on me now, her cigar's blunt tip flaring. I'd answer to her later, if she gave me the chance.

It was the worst thing I could think to say. The impulse had formed in the grip of sexual jealousy, of course. But before it crossed my lips I knew that my loathing had its origins in an even deeper place, in the mind of a child wondering at his father's own susceptibility to the notion of a hero.

What I said was this: "I once saw you rescue a paper clip." ◆



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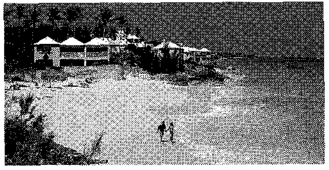

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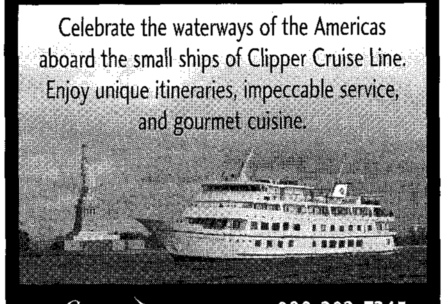

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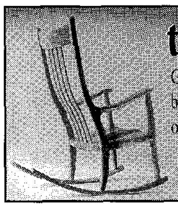

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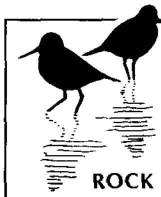

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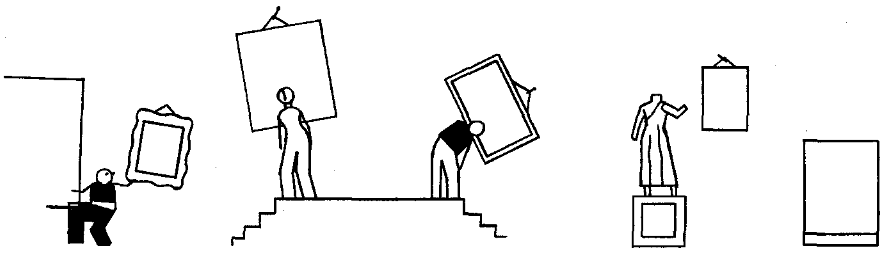


THE THEATRE

SCREWBALLS & ODDBALLS

Comedy and collapse in "Twentieth Century" and "Well."

BY JOHN LAHR

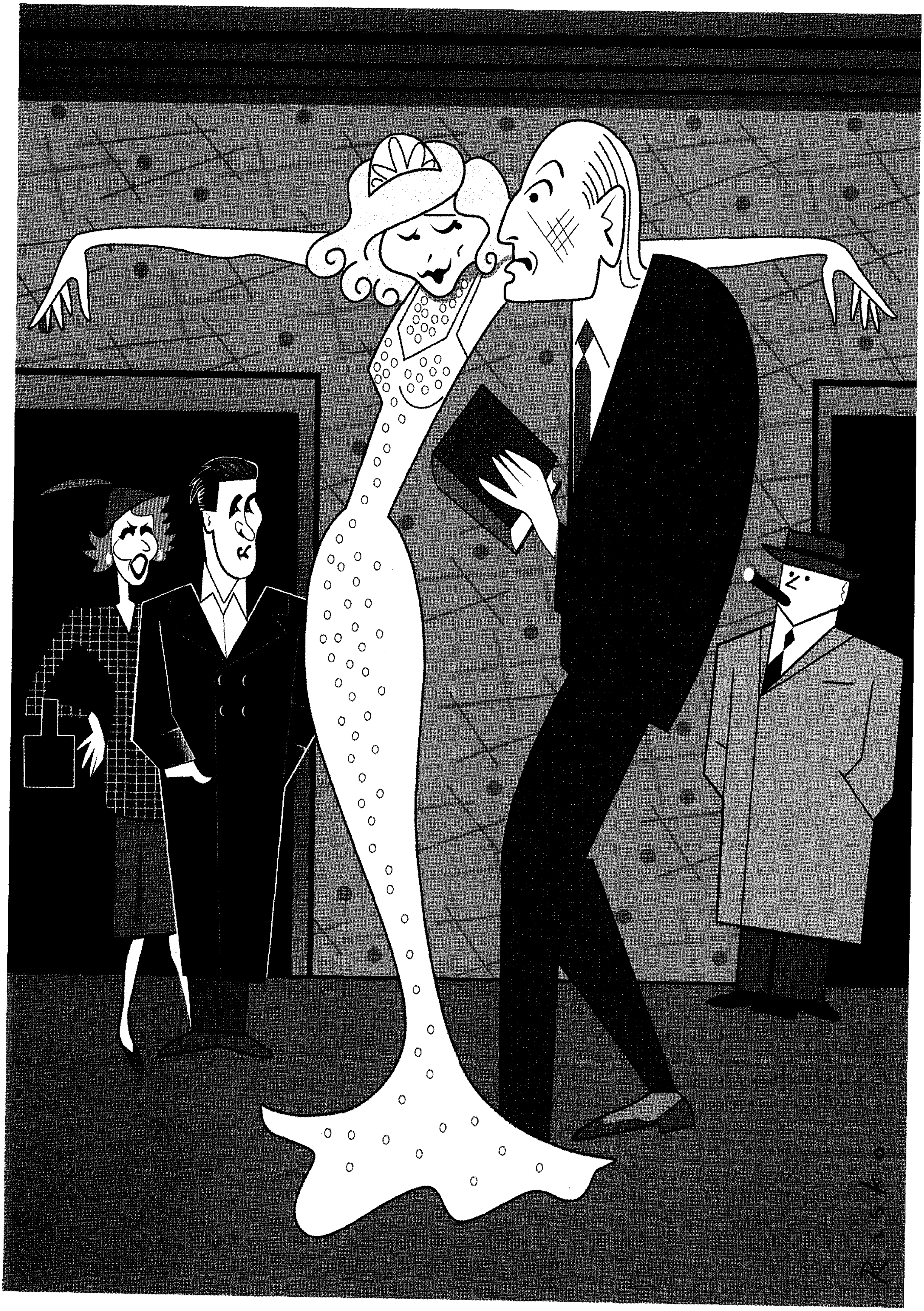
By 1934, when Howard Hawks's screwball comedy "Twentieth Century" was released, America had fallen victim to the twin catastrophes of the Depression and the Hays Office (the film industry's watchdog agency, inaugurated in the late twenties to prevent any exposure of female breasts, suggestion of cohabitation, or unconventional kissing from taking place onscreen). While F.D.R. was pioneering new ways to combat economic austerity, the screenwriters Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur, with their rapid-fire wisecracking wit, found a way around the erotic stringencies of the day by discovering a new erogenous zone: the ear. The sexy war of words around which their scripts were built opened up a new arena of competition, insinuation, and penetration. (The clamorous "His Girl Friday," which was adapted from a Hecht-MacArthur play, clocked in at two hundred and forty words per minute, almost double the average speaking pace.) In the midst of social and financial fiasco, Hecht and MacArthur's fast talk provided the republic with the hypnotic sound of potency. For both the characters and the public, the act of flamboyant self-assertion gave the illusion of coherence, courage, and clout.

"Twentieth Century" (in revival in a Roundabout Theatre Company production at the American Airlines) took its name from the deluxe, streamlined transcontinental train that epitomized the American delirium of momentum; in John Lee Beatty's clever Art Deco set, Pullman cars sliding along the proscenium create the illusion of movement. Comedy, as Charlie Chaplin once observed, is all about entrances and exits; it's a trick of the trade that Hecht and MacArthur were familiar with. Here, they spend fifteen minutes setting up the play's comic stakes, before the clapped-out impresario Oscar Jaffe (Alec Baldwin) and his former lover and protégée, Lily Garland (Anne Heche), now an Academy Award-winning star, can begin to hilariously act out, from their adjacent railway couchettes, society's battle between collapse and abundance. One of the first people on the train, at curtain rise, is a well-dressed old galoot who turns out to be a fundamentalist loony, Matthew Clark (the excellent, hatchet-faced Tom Aldredge); he scuttles through the cars plastering everything and everybody with stickers that read "Repent, for the time is at hand." Although this plays as comic hokum, it shows, for those who have eyes to see, that the issue of redemption is the message in the bottle here. Jaffe needs Garland's name to save his reputation and his assets; the histrionic Garland needs to be saved from herself. ("Oh, God, I'm so sick of myself," she says in a surprising flash of self-awareness following a tantrum.) As with all fun-house entertainments, we know from the beginning what the outcome will be; it's the clever maneuvering around the hurdles that makes the ride so thrilling.

In Walter Bobbie's slick production, the leading roles have been superbly cast. Like their characters, Baldwin and Heche have lived out their own caprices in public; in addition to their wit and alertness as players, they bring to the stage their own legends, which lend a particular vividness to their characterizations and make for a rich theatrical chemistry. Baldwin and Heche are both a little larger than life, and they like it that way. "Fate and *Weltschmertz* lie behind the most accidental of the Jaffe utterances. He is an Actor," the stage directions of this adaptation, by Ken Ludwig, explain. Baldwin, whose outspokenness on political issues has earned him the nickname the Bloviator in the right-wing press, knows all about the intoxication of public speaking; he milks Jaffe's orotund outbursts to terrific effect. "*Out! Out! Out! You traitor! I close the iron door on you!*" he says, firing his hardboiled assistant, Ida Webb (the droll Julie Halston), who keeps raining on his imaginary parade by reminding him of the red ink on his books. Baldwin invests Jaffe with what Tennessee Williams called the "stiff-necked pride of the defeated." Striding around his couchette in a purple smoking jacket and blue monogrammed slippers, he is a whirlwind of unrepentant pomposity, full of plans, memos, and dreams, whose vulgar grandiosity trumps their stupidity. "So you thought I was through, eh? Well, let me tell you something. That is when I'm at my best, my girl," he tells Webb, as his brain pinwheels with possibilities. "Ibsen," he barks at one point. "Find out if he's alive." When a German actor with the Oberammergau Players appears—"I am *der Christus*," the actor says, extending his arms and tilting his head toward his chest—Jaffe hits upon the most craven, meretricious, and sensational idea of his career: he'll stage the Passion of Christ with Garland as Mary Magdalene. "Who wrote it?" Garland asks, when Jaffe finally pitches her. "*God* wrote it," he pronounces.

Baldwin and Heche have a strong

In Walter Bobbie's slick production of "Twentieth Century," the leading roles, Alec Baldwin and Anne Heche, are superbly cast.



ROBERT RISKO

comic silhouette: he is beefy and bow-wow; she is bony and bitchy. At one point, enraged by Jaffe's reminder that she was once a shopgirl called Mildred Plotka, Garland throws her petite frame at him and rides him wildly like a puppet on a pony. Heche may not have the soft and pliant outline of the motor-mouthed thirties babes, but she's their equal in blond impudence. She couldn't give a flying fuck at a rolling doughnut, which makes her dangerous onstage and riveting to watch. "I despise money. I despise all those trappings, those baubles, those symbols of emptiness," Garland lies to her boy-toy agent, George (Ryan Shively), as porters lug bag after bag into her compartment. Garland may be self-invented, but she's self-supporting, too; she speaks with the authority of financial independence. When George later calls her honesty and honor into question, Garland answers him with the star's belligerent credo: she is, she says, "a first-class passenger entitled to privileges." The play doesn't mock the self-aggrandizing individualism that Garland shares with Jaffe; in fact, in the true spirit of Broadway commerce the show engineers its triumph. Along the way, however, it has good fun teasing Jaffe and Garland for their greed. "We don't know anything about love, do we," Garland admits to Jaffe in a rare moment of self-reflection, "unless it's written and rehearsed. We're only real between curtains." This commitment to survival at any price made these characters heroic fantasy figures in their time; in ours, it makes them haunting lost souls.

It is a comforting law of boulevard farce that whenever the world is turned upside down it will eventually be returned to the status quo. By the end of "Twentieth Century," for instance, Jaffe has his star, his production, and his name back in lights. In life, however, things don't always get better. Lisa Kron's cunningly written and compelling "Well" (at the Public) is a Pirandello-like examination of chronic illness. (It also deftly sends up the narrative limitations and self-involvement of most one-person shows.) Kron describes "Well" as "a solo show with some other people in it." One of those other people is her sick, obese, complaining but beloved mother, Ann (the superb Jayne Houdeyshell), whom she both berates and allows to hijack the play. "My mother is a fantastically energetic person trapped in an utterly exhausted body," she says of Ann, who attributes her "inability to move, to physically cope, to stay awake" to her allergies. Kron, who had a sickly, allergy-ridden childhood herself but recovered as an adult, is furious that her mother will not get well. She believes in change. ("I escaped to the land of the healthy people," she says, "the people who have chosen strength and health and sex and attractive clothes and organic foods and Target over Kmart.") And she refuses to accept that sometimes people can be wounded beyond repair. She engineers a face-off with her mother in which anger is dramatized as a form of hope.

Perhaps because she feels guilty for cannibalizing her past, Kron tends to allow her characters to get the best of her. They protest her scenes, join forces with her mother, and sometimes even attack her. "I can't *believe* I'm getting beat up in my own play," she says when a vagrant memory of a fifth-grade school bully suddenly materializes. But the trope of the interfering character is best practiced here by Houdeyshell, who, beneath her shambolic exterior, manages to convey a sharp intelligence and an informed heart. "You get out of that . . . special . . . light and stay here and deal with me," she tells her daughter.

The other characters' disagreements with Kron's authorial voice lend a sense of both modesty and accuracy to her personal history. Kron grew up Jewish in an integrated community in Lansing, Michigan, that was largely organized by her mother; and she lets a passage from one of her mother's speeches end the play and respond to her contentious ambivalence. "This is what integration means," Ann writes. "It means weaving into the whole even the parts that are uncomfortable or don't seem to fit. Even the parts that are complicated and painful." "Well" is an exercise in another kind of integration—emotional integration. Among the many things that the play demonstrates about the theatre, about American life, and about Kron's particular struggle, its most powerful and affecting display is of a daughter's love. ♦

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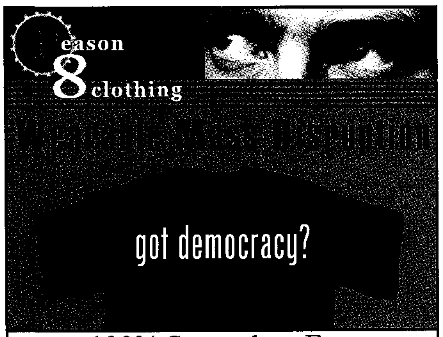
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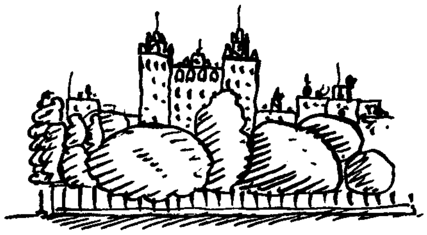
BRIEFLY NOTED

Literary Lives

A Chance Meeting, *by Rachel Cohen (Random House; $25.95).* In a manner that half recalls the friezes behind Barnes & Noble coffee bars of literary notables hobnobbing in an idealized café, Cohen's innovative study examines a century of American culture by describing historical encounters between such figures as Henry James, William Dean Howells, Gertrude Stein, James Baldwin, and Richard Avedon. Purists may quibble that Cohen varnishes her accounts with a layer of imaginative license, but her instincts are faultless; she gives a more intimate sense of these people in a few pages than one sometimes gleans from entire biographies. Anatomizing relationships based on love, admiration, envy, dislike—and, most often, a mixture of these—Cohen advances no thesis. But her effects are cumulative, as later writers and photographers, preoccupied with the sense of themselves as American artists, anxiously measure themselves against forebears we have already met.

All-Night Party, *by Andrea Barnet (Algonquin; $16.95).* We all know that Edna St. Vincent Millay burned her candle at both ends, but not necessarily that she spoke baby talk to her husband. This series of short biographies is a case-history candy box. The poet Mina Loy is shown in all her beauty and reckless flamboyance, abandoning two children in Italy, having a third in England and then parking it with the earlier two, and ending up on the Bowery, making sculptures out of egg crates and clothespins. This eclectic assortment of the daring, the devastating, and the derelict includes hostesses like Mabel Dodge and A'Lelia Walker, singers like Ethel Waters, and the editors of the *Little Review.* Barnet paints her subjects as pioneering feminists in revolt against established mores, though, arguably, money was almost as important as a spur to eccentricity; it is instructive that the collective good times came to an end with the crash of 1929.



John Gardner, *by Barry Silesky (Algonquin; $24.95).* Gardner, who in the nineteen-seventies published a number of best-selling literary novels ("The Sunlight Dialogues," "October Light"), was a singularly cantankerous and inspiring figure. By the time he died, in a motorcycle accident at the age of forty-nine, he had produced not only novels but story collections, librettos, studies of medieval literature, translations of epic poems, instructional manuals for writers, and the CliffsNotes for "Le Morte d'Arthur" (which he wrote in one night with the help of two pitchers of Martinis). Silesky overreaches when he argues that Gardner's advocacy of moral fiction turned the critical tide against metafictionists such as John Barth and Robert Coover. Still, his engaging, if sometimes cursory account reminds us of this writer's enormous energy and range.

Among the Bohemians, *by Virginia Nicholson (Morrow; $25.95).* In a vibrant catalogue of anecdotes and tragicomic episodes, Nicholson pays homage to British writers and artists who challenged convention before the Second World War. Living for art could exact a price—Robert Graves, hoping to subsidize his writing, made a disastrous foray into shopkeeping, while a destitute Dylan Thomas used his books as furniture. For Nicholson, such recklessly hand-to-mouth living is downright heroic. Although the eccentric domestic arrangements of the Bloomsbury group are a familiar topic, she casts her net wide to include lesser-known figures like Nina Hamnett, a fixture at London's Café Royal, and Betty May—the cocaine-addicted model of the sculptor Jacob Epstein—whose signature dish was grilled mouse on toast.

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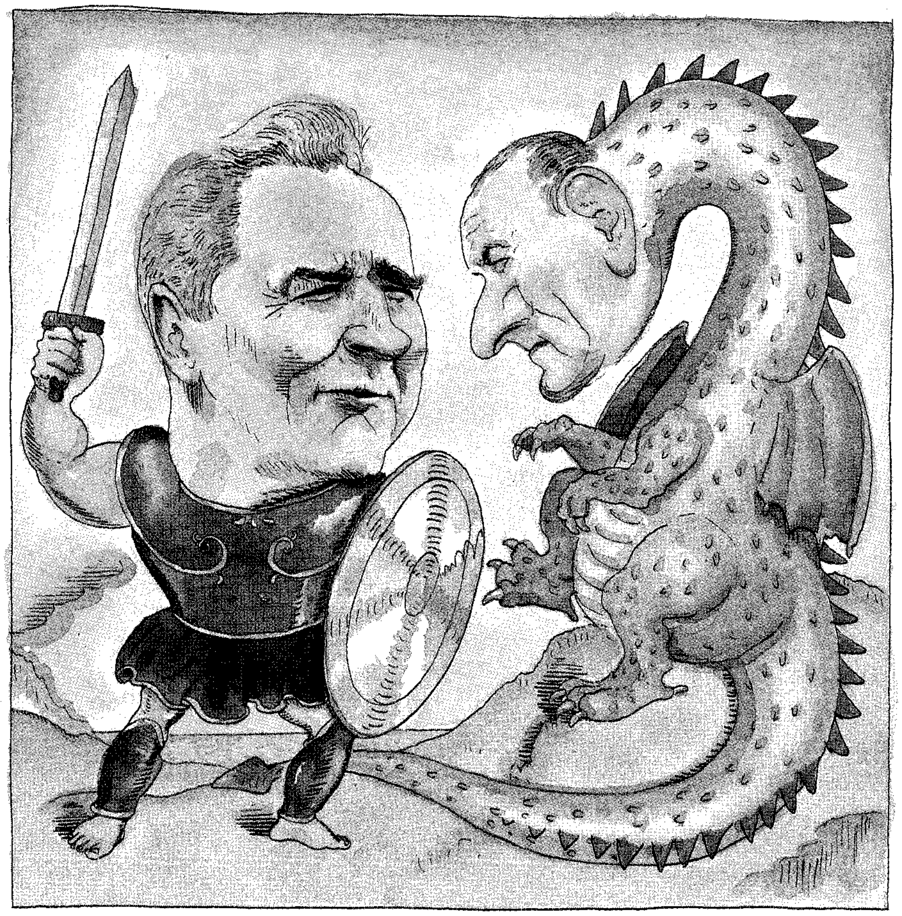
BOOKS

MEAN TO GENE

The strange career of Eugene McCarthy.

BY LOUIS MENAND



In 1968, doves and hawks wanted the same thing: they wanted Johnson out.

Eugene McCarthy, the dragon-slayer of American politics, belonged to a famous cohort of Minnesota Democrats who came together in the years after the Second World War and produced a governor, Orville Freeman, and two Vice-Presidents, Hubert Humphrey and Walter Mondale. He began his political career, in 1948, as a liberal anti-Communist congressman from Minnesota's Fourth District, which includes St. Paul. In 1958, after five terms in the House, he was elected to the Senate. Blessed with the patronage of the Majority Leader, Lyndon Johnson, he was soon identified, along with colleagues like Edmund Muskie, Philip Hart, and John F. Kennedy, as one of the ambitious young liberals prepared to take the stage as soon as Eisenhower could be wheeled off. Then his career suffered two minor abrasions. In 1960, he allied himself with Kennedy's rivals for the Democratic nomination—Humphrey, Johnson, and Adlai Stevenson—which put him at odds with an Administration in which he might have held a prominent position; and in 1964 he allowed himself to be the fall guy in a game of "Bachelor" played by Johnson at the National Convention, where Johnson pretended to be undecided until the last minute whether to name McCarthy or Humphrey as his running mate. Publicly spurned at the altar, McCarthy was then obliged, by Johnson, to deliver the speech placing Humphrey's name in nomination.

For another politician—the sort of politician who believes that it is better to be a player and lose than not to be a player—these wounds might have produced some scar tissue, but they would have stopped giving pain. McCarthy's skin was not so tough. Johnson, Humphrey, and even the Kennedys, who were certainly capable of holding a grudge, did not regard McCarthy as an enemy, but the experiences brought out in him the same politically dangerous emotion that later destroyed Richard Nixon—spite. McCarthy's subsequent actions were principled, but they had the tincture of vengeance.

His deconversion from the doctrines of interventionist anti-Communism followed the same sequence as that of many other Cold War liberals: distress at the American invasion of the Dominican Republic, in 1965; a growing awareness of the history of covert C.I.A. activities in other countries; and a conviction that the Administration was lying about the progress of the war in Vietnam. McCarthy was no pacifist, and he was hardly the first senator to oppose Johnson's Vietnam policies. But by 1966 he had joined the antiwar wing of the Democratic Party—with J. William Fulbright, Wayne Morse, Albert Gore, Sr., Robert F. Kennedy, and George McGovern. McCarthy's decision to challenge Johnson in the 1968 Democratic primaries was, in the beginning, tactical. In 1968, most Democratic delegates were appointed by state legislatures or were selected at state conventions, and McCarthy mounted no real effort in those states. He hoped by running in states that held primary elections either to force Johnson to change his policies on the war or to open up the Convention for an antiwar candidate, not necessarily himself. New Hampshire voted on March 12th. Officially, McCarthy lost: Johnson took forty-nine per cent of the Democratic vote, McCarthy forty-two per cent. But he made his point. Four days later, Kennedy entered the race. Two weeks after that, on March 31st, Johnson announced that he would not seek reëlection. The dragon was dead.

Kennedy was hot as a campaigner and McCarthy was cool, but McCarthy did not lose by the contrast. He ran well against Kennedy, beating him in Oregon and coming close in California. Despite

BARRY BLITT

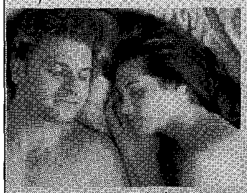
a lack of love between the two, their campaigns ostensibly had the same end in view, which was to deny Humphrey the nomination. The odds were long enough; Kennedy's assassination, on June 4th, effectively ended the hopes of the antiwar wing. It was not the uncertainty but the inevitability of a Humphrey victory that fed the fury in Chicago that August. McCarthy was disgusted when his old friend Muskie joined the ticket, and he withheld his endorsement until October.

In 1970, McCarthy retired from the Senate and embarked on one of the weirder and (to those who had been his admirers) more distressing afterlives in American politics. He entered the 1972 Democratic primaries, intent on defeating Muskie, who was the initial front-runner. McCarthy put most of his money and energy into Illinois, and Muskie trounced him there, sixty-three per cent to thirty-six per cent. In 1973, McCarthy explored the possibility of running for Congress from Minnesota's Sixth District, the part of the state where he was born, but he was made to understand that the Democrats of the Sixth District did not find the possibility thrilling, and he didn't run. In 1976, he ran for President in the general election as an independent. In 1980, he endorsed Ronald Reagan, a perversity motivated by his loathing for Jimmy Carter. He ran for the Presidency in 1988, as the candidate of the Consumer Party, and again, as a Democrat, in 1992, when he was seventy-six. He received two hundred and eleven votes in the New Hampshire primary. Some of those who voted for him may have believed they were casting their ballot for Joe McCarthy (a confusion from which McCarthy probably benefitted throughout his career). McCarthy now lives in a retirement home in Washington, D.C.

"Eugene McCarthy: The Rise and Fall of Postwar American Liberalism" (Knopf; $25.95), by Dominic Sandbrook, a young British historian, is an effort to map McCarthy's career onto the history of American liberalism. This is a little like trying to draw a straight line with a noodle. McCarthy was a liberal, but he was a Minnesota liberal, and a Catholic who took religion seriously. As Sandbrook points out, McCarthy once spent a year in a monastery, with a view to becoming a priest; he had already got engaged, and his fiancée had to wait for him to change his mind and come out before they could marry. He believed in government as an engine of social welfare, but his religious education helps to account for the attitude of *contemptus mundi* that was often detected by people who worked with him. It is not an attitude that one associates with men like Humphrey and Kennedy.

Although he shared with other liberals who entered public life during the Truman years a commitment to the Cold War, McCarthy was skeptical of the free market. "Distributive justice" is a concept that recurs in his thought from the nineteen-forties into the nineteen-sixties and beyond; the concept is well to the left of the standard liberal position after the New Deal. McCarthy's repudiation of the war policies of the Johnson Administration was also to the left of the mainstream of his party, and his views after 1968 grew so eccentric that they seemed self-conscious, as though he had made politics into a kind of performance art, in an age when people had lost their taste for performance. He ran on issues like the elimination of the Vice-Presidency and the direct popular election of the President, reforms whose relevance was decidedly obscure. His later campaigns suggested the same unpleasant combination of piety and frivolity as John and Yoko's bed-ins for peace. McCarthy's indifference to accolades and his disdain for grandstanding, which, during the 1968 campaign, struck older supporters as Stevensonian and younger ones as Zen, turned into a disdain even for being understood. He was capable of maneuvering for political advantage, but he kept getting his dignity caught up in his politics. Pride cast its shadow over everything he did. This makes him an interesting figure; it does not make him a representative one.

Sandbrook's book is distinguished by extensive research—notably, many interviews with people who knew and worked with McCarthy, including his estranged wife, Abigail (she died in 2001), along with interviews and correspondence with the subject himself. Sandbrook has discovered evidence that the Humphrey campaign secretly helped McCarthy in



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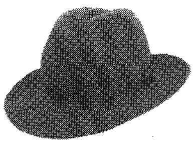

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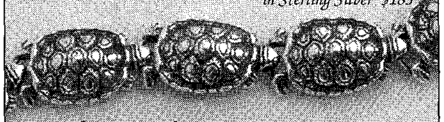

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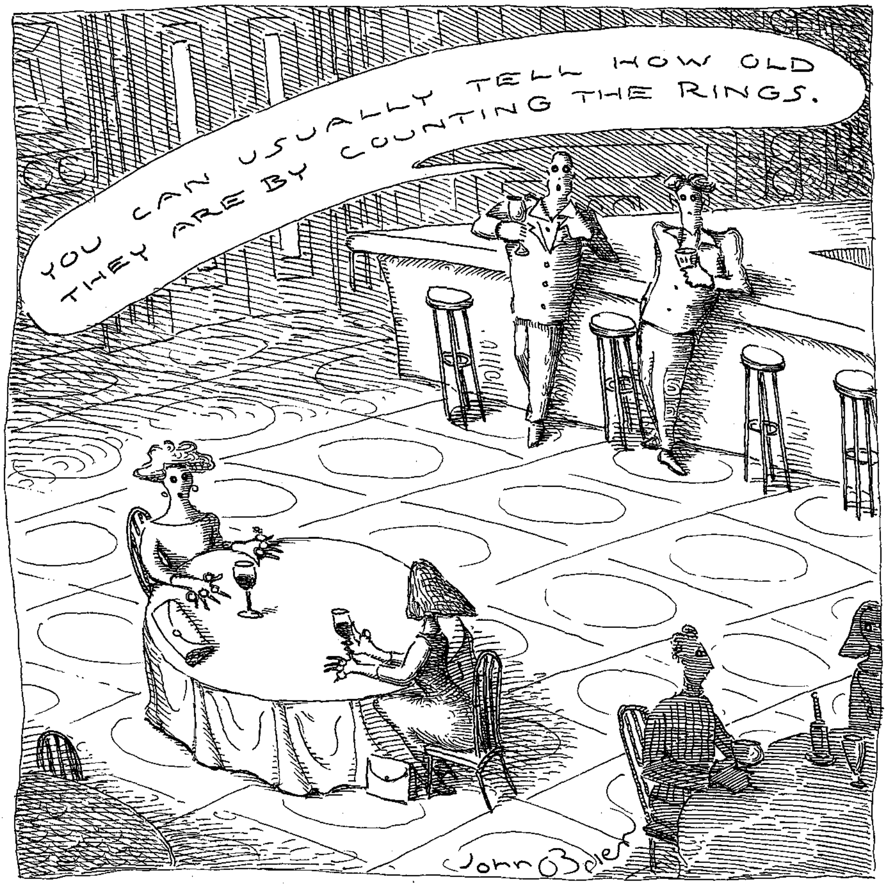
the 1968 primaries in order to deny delegates to Kennedy, a man Humphrey feared and McCarthy disliked. Sandbrook reports that after Kennedy was assassinated an exhausted and depressed McCarthy met with Humphrey and, according to Humphrey's notes, begged him not to put Teddy Kennedy on the ticket.

Sandbrook's book is also intelligent, well written, and unremittingly unsympathetic. Sandbrook doesn't simply disagree with many of McCarthy's positions and deplore many of McCarthy's choices. He finds McCarthy sour, aloof, unfeeling, and inconstant, and he comes very close to blaming him personally for the election of Richard Nixon and the rise of the Republican right. He concludes his discussion of the 1968 election by remarking, "Had it not been for McCarthy's campaign, it is possible that Johnson or Humphrey might have been elected. . . . Voters did not in fact treat the election in November as a referendum on Vietnam, and given that they chose Nixon as their next president, it can easily be argued that McCarthy ultimately failed." And he concludes his book with the comment "There is not always honor in failure."

Whatever McCarthy's shortcomings—and even in the period of his lionization a streak of contrariness was evident in his nature—he did not lose the White House for the Democrats. Johnson and Humphrey lost the White House, and they did it because they stubbornly pursued a bad policy, and they prevaricated about it. It's true, as Sandbrook points out, that many of the people who voted for McCarthy in New Hampshire favored *escalation* of the war, and a surprising proportion of them voted in the general election for George Wallace. But those voters basically wanted what the doves wanted: they wanted Johnson out, and they wanted the war to be over. McCarthy's delayed endorsement may have encouraged a small number of liberals to punish Humphrey by staying home on Election Day, but (something Sandbrook does not mention) Humphrey started to close the polling gap with Nixon only when, well into the campaign, he announced that, if elected, he would suspend the bombing of North Vietnam. His loyalty to the Administration—just what McCarthy despised him for—is what did him in.


YOU CAN USUALLY TELL HOW OLD THEY ARE BY COUNTING THE RINGS.
John O'Brien

"What if" is a legitimate indoor sport for political historians. What if Gore had let Clinton campaign for him in 2000? What if Nixon had worn the right television makeup in 1960? What if Robert Kennedy had entered the race first, before McCarthy? The game is a reminder that in extremely close elections, like those of 1960, 1968, 1976, and 2000, the outcome reflects the same degree of intentionality as a flipped penny. If the election had been held a day earlier or a day later or when it wasn't raining, the result could easily have been the opposite—and yet we proceed to talk about "the new optimism of the Kennedy years" or "the country's turn to the right in 2000," as though the result actually reflected a national consensus.

Commentators on the election of 1968 tend to look for ways to explain how the Democrats managed to lose twelve million votes between 1964 and 1968. Was it because McCarthy and Kennedy split the Party? Was it because the Chicago Convention was a violent melee? It's possible that the real fluke in postwar Presidential politics was the election of 1964—not the outcome, but the margin of victory. Johnson's overwhelming defeat of Goldwater was not a reliable index of the political tendencies of the country; it was a tribute to a dead man at the expense of a self-described extremist who was even more politically tone-deaf than Eugene McCarthy. As Rick Perlstein argued in his recent book on Goldwater, "Before the Storm," Goldwater the candidate may have been unelectable, but that did not mean that Goldwater's views were unpopular. Only two politicians seem to have grasped this at the time. One was Nixon, and the other was Ronald Reagan.

In many respects, Sandbrook's volume makes a worthy companion to Perlstein's book on Goldwater, but Perlstein is a journalist and Sandbrook is an academic. (His book began as a dissertation at Cambridge University.) Perlstein is interested in the story; Sandbrook is interested in the analysis. The analysis is learned and sharp; still, it is stunning to arrive at the chapter on the Presidential primaries of 1968 and read, "There has been so much written about the campaign that it makes little sense to give a detailed narrative here." Sandbrook is as good as his word. Robert Kennedy declares his candidacy on page 187; on page 188, he is dead. There is, in this diffidence, a hint of the academic dread of the twice-said. Academics suffer from an anxiety that if they repeat what they imagine other self-respecting professionals already know they will seem naïve or, even worse, "not smart." But we are reading about Eugene McCarthy today only because of what he did in 1968. The other parts of his life are bookends. Before 1968, McCarthy was a Northern liberal frustrated by the conservative coalition of Republicans and Southern Democrats in Congress, a politician who was idealistic and intellectual, and had a reputation for laziness. After 1968, he was a burned-out pop star who couldn't stop touring—willful, sardonic, and happily freed from obligations to a Party he no longer respected. In 1968, though, the world was on fire, and McCarthy caught fire with it. He allowed himself to be sucked into the vortex; his biographer ought to follow him there.

The year 1968 is when American Presidential politics met the street. In the long view, the historians' view, the street—or, as it was named by the candidates and the press, "the kids"—may not have been a significant factor in the outcome. Voters who were "turned on" by the kids were undoubtedly counterbalanced by voters who were distinctly turned off. But there were things—people imagined that there were things, anyway—at stake in 1968 besides the Presidency. Sandbrook is somewhat scornful of the poetry McCarthy became notorious for writing during the campaign, of his preferring to hang out with Robert Lowell than to talk with the press. But the poetry expressed what McCarthy was all about:

> I'm an existential runner,
> Indifferent to space.
> I'm running here in place.

He did not want to be President—"Who would want the job?" he said to reporters when his plane landed in Chicago for the Convention. He wanted to stand for decency. Decency, in 1968, meant precisely transcending politics in the ordinary sense—in the Humphrey sense or even the Kennedy sense. That McCarthy was temperamentally suited to display indifference to practical considerations might have been a liability in other times (though he was, after all, a highly successful vote-getter in Minnesota); but in 1968 indifference made a difference.

This is why McCarthy loved his own "kids," the clean-for-Gene kids, and why he hated the radicals. Sandbrook tells the story of McCarthy looking down from his suite in the Hilton Hotel as the Chicago police beat up protesters on Michigan Avenue, and he repeats the reports that McCarthy was, at first, cool to the scene, making allusions to the Punic Wars and the like. He does not report that McCarthy was divided about whether to go down to the street—he did not want to associate himself, or his "kids" (who were also being beaten) with the radicals—and he does not cite Theodore White's observations. "Slowly, McCarthy's detachment changed to outrage as the blood and gore of the hurt sank in on him, and to fury as the minions of the Hilton Hotel protested the tearing up of sheets and pillowcases to bandage the wounded," White wrote in "The Making of the President, 1968." White considered McCarthy to be fairly hopeless as a candidate, but he was there in the hotel. McCarthy thought that Humphrey and Richard J. Daley had, in Chicago, crushed the idealism of the Democratic Party. Why would he ever have cared to advance that party's fortunes again?

The vortex of the late nineteen-sixties swallowed up not only Eugene McCarthy. It consumed a whole generation of liberal politicians and radical thinkers and culture heroes, from John Lindsay and Marshall McLuhan to Tom Hayden and Buckminster Fuller—a long list of "an idea whose time has come" types whose time abruptly ran out. The survivors wandered, as McCarthy did, through the decades that followed, caricatures of their former world-historical selves, like old heavyweight champions working as greeters in casinos. You could say that these people failed; but what would success have looked like? McCarthy was seized by the moment. He deliberately sacrificed his career to stand on ground that no other Democrat had the courage to venture out on. He was entitled, in the decades that followed, to a little resentment. ♦

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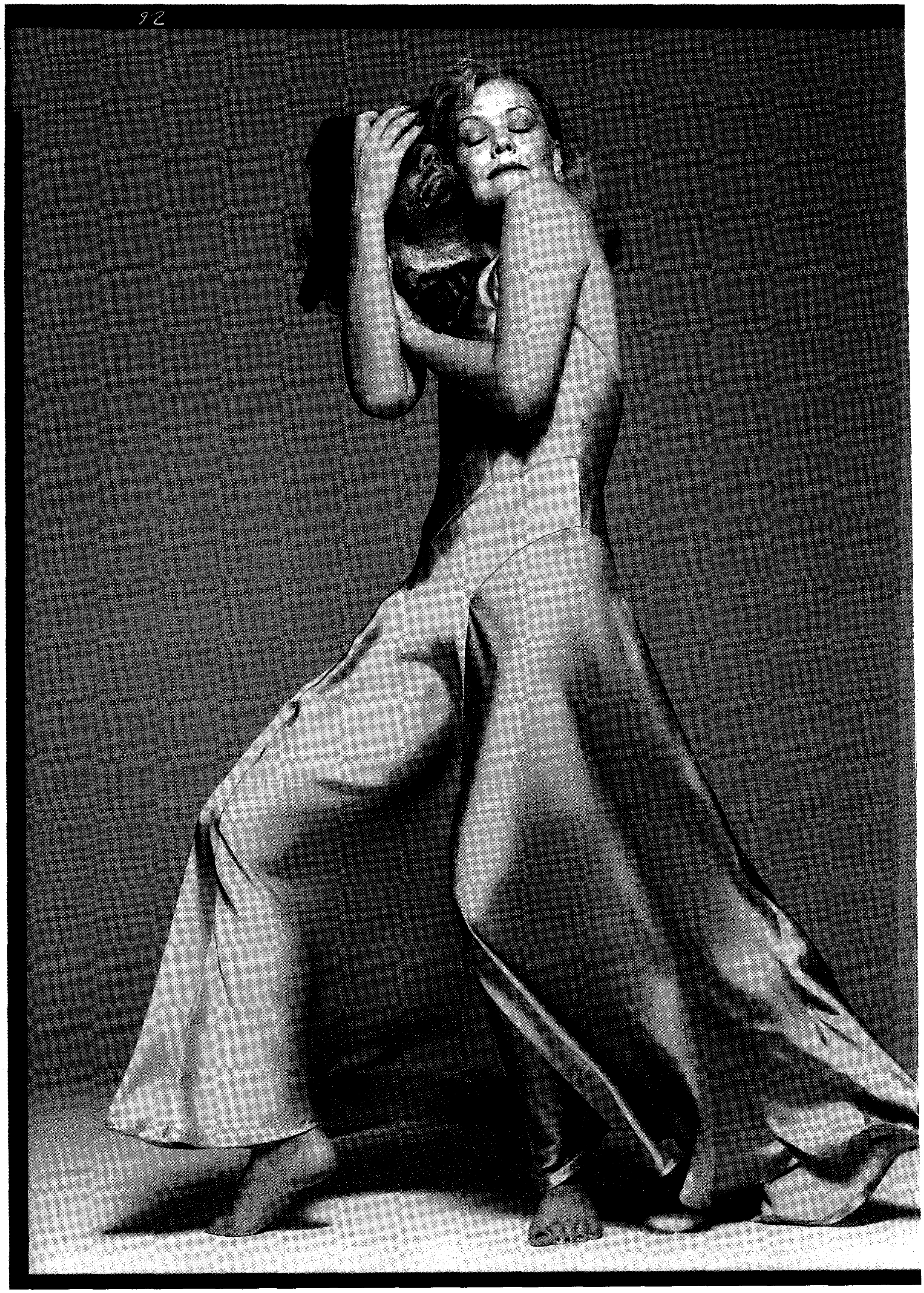
92

MUSICAL EVENTS

MYSTERIES OF LOVE

Karita Mattila's transfixing Salome.

BY ALEX ROSS

The first time the Metropolitan Opera staged Richard Strauss's "Salome," ninety-seven years ago, J. P. Morgan's daughter blanched at the sight of a soprano making out with a severed head, and the production was shut down after one night. The ballerina who had performed the Dance of the Seven Veils on the Met stage decided to take her act to a vaudeville house, where she had a considerably warmer reception. America was soon in the grip of a Salome craze. In January, 1909, Strauss's opera reappeared in triumph at Oscar Hammerstein's Manhattan Opera House, with the bewitching Mary Garden in the title role. Not long afterward, a singing waiter at Jimmy Kelly's, in Union Square, wrote a song entitled "Sadie Salome (Go Home)," which told of a nice Jewish girl who dismays her sweetheart, Mose, by playing Salome onstage. "Don't do that dance, I tell you, Sadie," Mose pleads. "That's not a business for a lady!" It wasn't much of a song, but it sold well enough to win its composer a job on Tin Pan Alley. A few years later, he wrote "Alexander's Ragtime Band."

Karita Mattila's performance in the Met's new production of "Salome" is unlikely to inspire a commemorative number from the next Irving Berlin, but by rights it should. The only word fit for the occasion is a British one: Mattila left her audience gobsmacked. She sang one of the most taxing roles in the repertory as if it had been written for her, and she delivered a physical performance that might have had any stray Hollywood executives in the audience wondering how to cast her in a remake of "Double Indemnity." She made an organic whole of this outwardly lurid, inwardly elusive part. Salome, the Bible tells us, danced for her stepfather, Herod, and demanded the head of John the Baptist as a reward. Jules Laforgue added the scandal of the kiss, and Oscar Wilde piled on arch Symbolist poetry: "The mystery of love is greater than the mystery of death." But what kind of love is this, and how can we bear to watch it? In the opening scenes, Mattila portrays Salome as an intensely vapid young woman, a club-hopping heiress type, who apes the decadent culture that bred her. Then the game she plays to keep herself amused—seducing the religious fanatic that Daddy/Uncle has trapped in a cistern—becomes an uncontrollable obsession. Mattila makes the transformation so supple that the audience ends up feeling pity rather than disgust. The character is fearfully real.

Mattila sang all the notes, which is diabolically difficult to do. In "Salome," a soprano goes up against one of the great monster orchestras in opera history. At the most gobsmacking moment in the score—the point at which the executioner makes a gift of the prophet's head—a hundred instruments flood the spectrum of the chromatic scale, leaving almost no room for the naked human voice. Mattila held out heroically against the onslaught. Her high A-flats glowed like searchlights in fog. Her voice is both richly lyrical and riskily dramatic, and has the same balance of qualities that makes for a great Isolde, which Mattila is certain to be. Only in the lowest register did she lack penetrating power—notably, in the cavernous passage about the mysteries of love and death. But every soprano is missing something in this role. Mattila sings as well as anyone on the twelve recordings I own.

Plus, she did a little dancing. Ordinarily, the Dance of the Seven Veils is a would-be titillating moment that makes everyone uncomfortable: opera singers are not, by nature, physical performers, and even the fittest Salomes seem out of their element as they muddle through whatever choreography has been set up for them. In fact, you don't need a Kylie Minogue physique to pull off the role. Deborah Voigt, who was recently fired by Covent Garden because she was too big for a tiny cocktail dress, sings a mighty Salome, and she should be doing it onstage, perhaps with an arty concept to replace the dance. If the scene is to advance the drama, it has to be about something more than a woman taking off her clothes. Mattila, exulting in a transvestite striptease routine that echoed Marlene Dietrich's "Blue Angel" and Madonna's "Material Girl" video, made it more about Herod's mixed-up fantasies than about her own: the tetrarch has more than a little Wilde in him, and he gets off on the ambiguities.

There is physical nakedness, and there is emotional nakedness. Mattila gives us the first at the end of the dance, and she gives us the second at the end of the opera, when, after a devouring kiss and a scary spell of heavy breathing, she hangs her head backward over the lip of the stage and delivers the final part of her monologue: "Ah, I have kissed your mouth, Jochanaan." No one will soon forget the desperation in her tone and on her face—the desperation of one who has performed the most extreme act and is still trapped in an agony of dissatisfaction. To this Salome, Herod's closing words—"Kill that woman!"—may sound merciful.

In realizing her dream performance, Mattila had much help from Jürgen Flimm, whose productions at the Met and elsewhere—"Fidelio," the current Bayreuth "Ring"—have put him at the forefront of a generally dismal science. He is the rare director who makes tension visible. The sets, by Santo Loquasto, place the action at some vague date in the twentieth century, in a Middle Eastern country where the occupying authorities have hired a security force from the native population. Herod's palace resembles a grand hotel on the edge of the desert: partygoers in opulent clothes descend a serpentine staircase and pose on stainless-steel furniture. John the Baptist is imprisoned not in a cistern but in a desert mine shaft; he is brought up in a rickety cage. The Jewish theologians in

PHOTOGRAPH BY RICHARD AVEDON

Mattila's transformation from vapid amusement to unhinged obsession is so supple that the audience feels pity, not disgust.

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Herod’s circle are not averse to sipping champagne as they argue the Law. Sand dunes stretch into the far distance, and James Ingalls’s lighting hints at a menace lurking in the dark. Black angels with white wings periodically appear, watching and waiting. There might be a provocative allegory at work here—these ostensibly Christian angels have a certain Al Qaeda look—but what really matters is that Flimm creates a charged space in which something terrible is bound to occur.

Happily, most of the campy clichés that dog this opera have been suppressed. Herod is too often conceived as a dirty old man, and an aging tenor is let loose to chew the scenery. In fact, Herod is supposed to be quite a bit younger than his wife, Herodias; she acts like his mother, which makes the incestuousness of the scenario all the creepier. Allan Glassman, stepping in on short notice for Siegfried Jerusalem, sang the part instead of rasping it, and in the process revealed some trace of nobility, some tremor of moral compass, at the heart of the wormy tyrant. Larissa Diadkova, on the other hand, was too composed as Herodias; she could have chewed a little more. Albert Dohmen was a rock-solid John the Baptist. (This week, Bryn Terfel takes over the role.) There were some notable singers in the smaller parts: Matthew Polenzani lent his stylish tenor to Narraboth, and Morris Robinson, a former Citadel college football star, showed a glorious bass voice as the First Nazarene.

The shaky link of the evening was, surprisingly, Valery Gergiev. The conductor knows this score by heart, and he obtains his usual painterly sounds. There were trombone chords like groans from Hell, string tremolos like moonlight on water. But the middle of the opera, from Herod’s entrance to the Dance, sped by in a confusing blur. Many lovely, eerie touches were obscured—the little woodwind runs that suggest Narraboth’s blood dripping on the floor, for example—and the brass sounded flustered throughout. Slow down, Maestro: “Salome” is one of the briefest operas in the repertory, and every detail is worth savoring.

Earlier this month, the Met unveiled a largely nondescript production of “Don Giovanni.” It caused me to reflect on the legacy of Joseph Volpe, the Met’s general manager, who recently announced that he would be stepping down in 2006. As usual, the cast featured singers of high polish: Thomas Hampson as the Don, René Pape as Leporello, Anja Harteros as Donna Anna, Christine Goerke as Donna Elvira, Hei-Kyung Hong as Zerlina. But with “Don Giovanni” polish is not enough; Hampson lacked demonic drive, the joy of excess. Pape so completely stole the show that many people may have wondered why he wasn’t singing the title role, as he has been doing in Europe. (Answer: contracts signed years in advance.) The best that can be said of Marthe Keller’s production is that it has none of the bombast of the affair that preceded it, by Franco Zeffirelli. High brick walls predominate, in front of which perilously little happens; it appears as if funding had been cut off halfway through set construction, which, given the Met’s current financial difficulties, might have been the case. The combination of this lackluster “Don” and the sensational “Salome” encapsulates the lotterylike unevenness of the company’s productions in the past decade.

Dawn Fatale, the pseudonymous Internet-based opera watchdog, has posted a screed on OperaList arguing that the next general manager of the Met should be something other than a ruthless administrator with a knack for whipping divas into shape. Instead, Fatale says, Volpe’s successor needs to be “a compelling spokesperson for the importance of live opera performance in New York and America’s cultural life”—a charismatic executive with a unified theatrical vision and a flair for marketing. Volpe and James Levine have maintained the Met’s historic eminence, but they have done almost nothing to renovate the company’s image. For too long, the Met has subsisted as a tautology: it presents grand opera on a grand scale because that is what the Met has always done. Falling attendance figures suggest that such complacency is inadequate, even suicidal. Like every major classical institution, the Met must devise new ways to sell itself to an uncomprehending but not incurious culture. In truth, the cancellation of “Salome” in 1907 marked not the last gasp of Victorian mores but the beginning of a century of caution. Surely it is time for the Met to get the J. P. Morgan out of its system once and for all. Why does opera matter? Karita Mattila can tell you. ♦

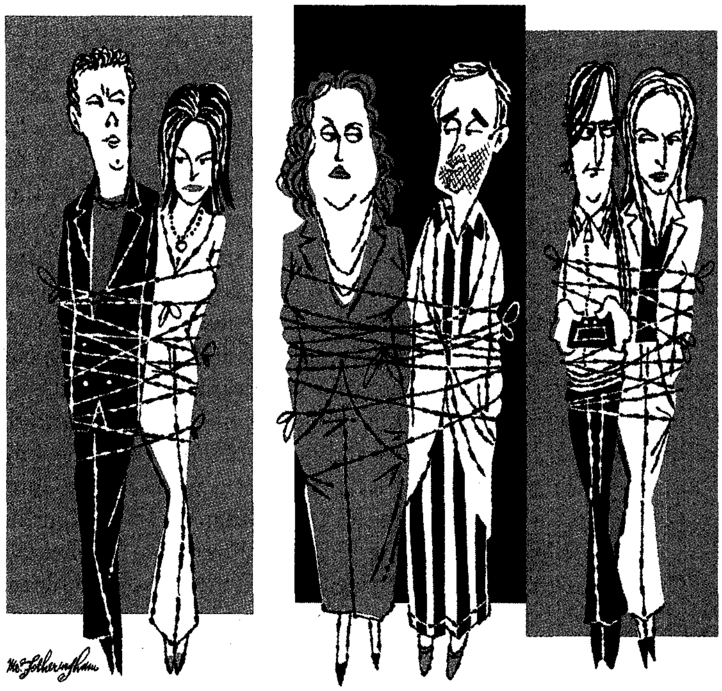
ON TELEVISION

IT TAKES TWO

“Significant Others” showcases the comedy in coupling.

BY NANCY FRANKLIN

The theme song for the Bravo miniseries “Significant Others,” an improvisational comedy about the marriages and the marriage-therapy sessions of four couples, is a speed-rock version of the old Partridge Family hit with the refrain “I think I love you, so what am I so afraid of / I’m afraid that I’m not sure of a love there is no cure for.” Leaving aside the bizarreness of any Partridge Family song’s having survived into the twenty-first century in any form, the musical question and answer happen to be pertinent to the marital fix that these couples find themselves in: they’re afraid that they’ve been swallowed up by marriage and are stuck with partners who are only intermittently the people they bargained for. The tempo of the song echoes the brisk pacing and the wham-bam editing of the show, as it cuts between the couples’ lives in the outside world and on the therapeutic couch. Larry David’s improvisational comedy “Curb Your Enthusiasm” takes its time. The recent season finale, in which Larry makes his Broadway début in “The Producers,” was so packed with complications and twists that it seemed—in a good way—to last almost as long as a feature film; you pushed back from the table feeling satisfied and full. “Significant Others,” which was created by Robert Roy Thomas and Peter Tortorici, the former president of CBS Entertainment, is satisfying in a different way—each half hour goes by so fast that you want another helping right away. (The fifth of six parts airs this week, but all the episodes will be repeated through May.)



Husbands and wives try to undo the knots in the ties that bind.

The first time three of the couples appear onscreen—in quick scenes at the opening of the first episode—as they are all starting the day in the Los Angeles suburb of Rolling Hills, they are either in conflict or on the verge of it. James and Chelsea (Brian Palermo and Andrea Savage), a handsome young couple who have been married for three months (the time served by each couple is shown on the screen), are in bed; she wants to have sex, but he won’t coöperate because she hasn’t brushed her teeth yet. In another house in town, the fifteen-year marriage of the early-middle-aged Bill and Connie (Fred Goss and Jane Edith Wilson) is close to exhaustion. Bill has lost his job and, instead of doing anything about it, he hangs out in his bathrobe, unshaven and unkempt, letting dishes and detritus pile up in the kitchen; his retreat into sardonic indifference, which recalls Kevin Spacey’s in “American Beauty” (and Goss bears some physical resemblance to Spacey), enrages Connie, who charges into the kitchen and, with a frustrated sweep of her arm, shoves the mess from the counter onto the floor. And then there is Ethan and Eleanor (Herschel Bleefeld and Faith Salie), the youngest of the couples, who have been married for eighteen months. Eleanor is working on a chapter of a dissertation, and Ethan, a slacker who doesn’t take anything seriously, is playing a video game. She freaks out because she thinks the computer has lost her work, and Ethan, after retrieving the chapter, pretends to delete it, for the sixth-grade-level fun of watching her freak out again. (A fourth couple, Devon and Alex, played by Chris Spencer and Nicole Randall Johnson, don’t enter the series until the fifth episode.)

The six of them are starting couples therapy that day, some more reluctantly than others, and we listen to them talk as they sit on a couch facing the camera. We never see or hear the therapist, because essentially *we*, sitting on our own couches at home, are the therapist. During these sessions, we don’t find out much more about the couples than what their behavior and conversations have already told us, though it’s always interesting to see how people act in this particular setting—how they contrive to persuade the therapist that they themselves are blameless, that everything is the other person’s fault, and that they don’t really need to be there in the first place. In the second session, James, who told the therapist right off the bat that he and Chelsea were there to address her “character flaws”—meaning the things about her that don’t suit him—announces that they’ve decided to move on and stop coming. In the next breath, he asks the therapist, “Do you do weekends?” Ethan, who is compulsively funny—meaning that he is often *not* funny, at least in his wife’s opinion—says, when she tells the therapist that she is pregnant, “With, like, a baby?”

In “The Sopranos,” Tony’s sessions

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with his psychiatrist were as intense and raw and realistic for viewers as they were for Tony; I think it's fair, if embarrassing, to say that it took several years for many viewers to get over their transference to Dr. Melfi. In "The Sopranos," we were *in* therapy; in "Significant Others," we're sympathetic witnesses to the ridiculousness of it all. We feel their pain, but we're also laughing at them. And part of what makes these scenes fun to watch is knowing that the actors are having to solve two improv problems at once: they have to relate to each other and to the person who is supposedly sitting across from them. If you judge by "American Idol" and the countless other shows that pander to fantasies of winning the world's attention, a lot of people feel that they have the talent to do anything if given the chance; but when you watch "Significant Others" you're aware that you're watching the actors do something that few people can do well, and you just want to write them a thank-you note.

"Significant Others" doesn't have a one-item agenda about marriage, as did, say, HBO's recently departed and unmourned "The Mind of the Married Man," which had a relentlessly ugly and stereotype-filled take on the institution. In that show, marriage was a death spiral into a black hole. "Significant Others" takes a longer and better-observed view—it allows its characters a wide range of responses. (When Ethan and Eleanor are having dinner with her father, and Ethan, trying to sound the way he thinks a father-to-be should, says how much he is looking forward to having a baby, Eleanor's father's jocular patter screeches to a halt. He says, "Say goodbye to your life," and in an I-hate-babies voice starts imitating a child's whine: "Mommy, Daddy, give me that.") When the show does trade in generalizations, they are the kind that are hard to argue with—one being that marriage is a mixture of predictability and surprises, and that even the parties involved don't know how much of each any given day will hold. And because of the show's well-conceived over-all structure, and the excellent acting in it (several cast members have spent time with the Groundlings, the Los Angeles improv group), we are not sure what to expect, either, even though our first glimpses of each couple lead us to believe that we know exactly who they are and what they're going to do and say. We're not surprised that the irritable Eleanor says to Ethan, when he parks their car at a grocery store and she has trouble getting out, "Why do you park so close to everything?" But when Bill and two of his friends are in a coffee shop and he tells them that he is sleeping with his wife's sister, we might not expect them to advise him to keep sleeping with her until they can figure out how to help him out of the situation, because if he doesn't she'll get angry. And, because there is no laugh track to boss us around, we are also, thankfully, left to our own devices when it comes to deciding what's funny and what isn't.

When comedies without a laugh track work, it's because they are smart enough to be able to convey that things are often both funny and not funny at the same time, and that's the case in "Significant Others." In the therapy session after Connie has found out about Bill's infidelity, the two of them sit in silence, with Connie just shaking her head and Bill shifting position uncomfortably. We see the other couples going about their business, but the camera keeps returning hopefully to Connie and Bill, only to find them still stuck in their psychic traffic, with the therapeutic meter running. Somebody has to say *something*, and finally Connie says that she wants to leave Bill but knows that he can't live without her. Bill waits for a while, and you expect him to deny it, and insist that he can get along without her very well, and that he wants to separate, too. But instead he says, "It's true," his response both an admission of affection and an acknowledgment of the second part of "for better or for worse." While we think we know these people, "Significant Others" reminds us that outsiders never really know what's going on in someone else's marriage (though another Bravo series, a reality show coming this summer called "Things I Hate About You," in which real couples document with video cameras what it is about each other that drives them crazy, will no doubt try to prove otherwise). The fact that two people throwing their lot in with each other, supposedly for life, is a mystery doesn't mean that it isn't also funny, and the fact that it's funny doesn't mean that it isn't also a mystery. ♦

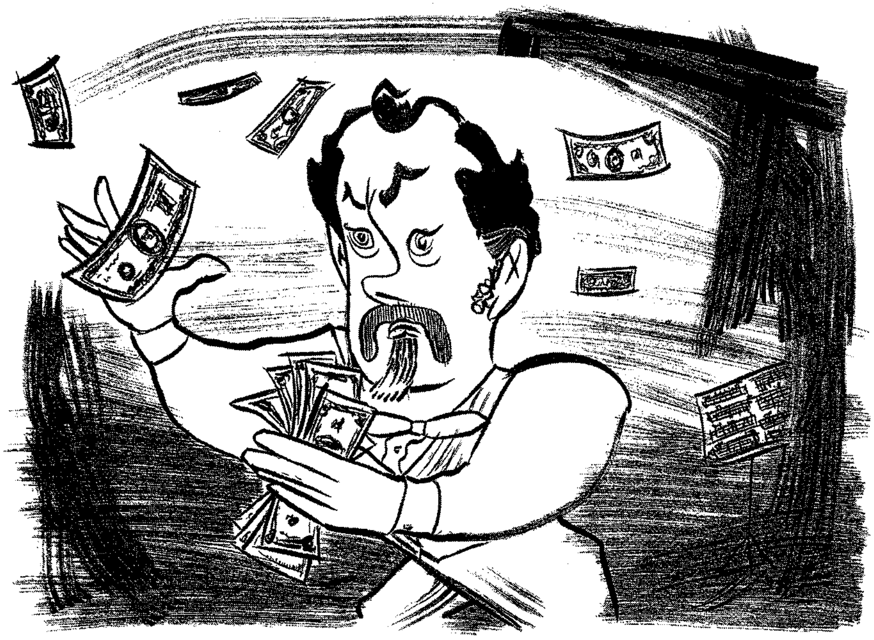
THE CURRENT CINEMA

HEISTS

"The Ladykillers," "Intermission."

BY ANTHONY LANE

Why remake "The Ladykillers"? The original, directed by the Scotsman Alexander Mackendrick in 1955, was not the cream of the Ealing comedies—that supremacy belongs to "Kind Hearts and Coronets"—but it outstrips the tweeness of some of its fellows, giving off a peculiar blend of charm and menace. It was that combination, presumably, which tweaked the fancy of America's leading magpies, the Coen brothers. They rarely spy a genre that they do not wish to pilfer.



Tom Hanks as Professor Goldthwait Higginson Dorr in the Coen brothers' movie.

TOM BACHTELL

The tale has been lugged from the dankness of England to a warm American South. Here, on a peaceful street, lives Marva Munson (Irma P. Hall), together with her cat, Pickles, and an oil painting of her late husband, who is no less influential for being late. One day, Mrs. Munson is visited by a gentleman. Professor Goldthwait Higginson Dorr (Tom Hanks) is seeking to rent a room from the good lady, who wrinkles her nose when he declares that he is a Ph.D. ("You mean like Elmer?" she asks, hearing a Fudd sound), but who otherwise likes the look of him—cottons and linens of toffee and cream, plus a loose little bow tie that a child would try to twirl. The Professor asks if he may invite friends around to rehearse music; the cellar will do just fine. They play mostly Renaissance, certainly nothing later than rococo. "Ro-co-co," Marva repeats, as if she were a rooster.

Needless to say, his guests are devotees not of strings and sounding brass but of the $1.6 million stashed in the vaults of a nearby casino. Under cover of music, they dig a tunnel, using no more than a smattering of explosive, and retrieve the loot. The Professor's gang is a mixed bunch. There is Gawain MacSam (Marlon Wayans), a shambling slacker who functions as their inside man at the casino. There is Garth Pancake (J. K. Simmons), a mad but upright citizen of the old school, with a mustache the size of a horseshoe. There is Lump (Ryan Hurst), a fool of a football player, whose technique for testing a jammed revolver is to look it in the barrel. And, last, there is the General (Tzi Ma), who flourished, one is led to conjecture, as a rat in the tunnels of Southeast Asia.

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have the Coens, teaming with Hanks for the first time; we have a heist; and we have an eager colloquium of bit parts, bursting with comic business. So how come "The Ladykillers" turns out to be dead in the water? At the première, you could sense the audience rustling with high hopes, and, for a while, we were tugged along by the kooky momentum, as each of the characters was introduced with a party piece of farce—the Professor crashing from a tree, the General repelling a raid on the doughnut shop where he works. But that, it became clear, was the problem: everybody in and around this movie is trying too hard. Everybody pulls a silly face, or sports a behavioral tic, or shouts his lines a little too loud, for too long, with the camera hanging in close to record the comic effort. After half an hour, we realized that, instead of enjoying a funny film, we were being lightly bullied into finding fun where precious little exists.

The wrong note is struck from the start, as Mrs. Munson walks to the sheriff's office and inveighs against the habits of the younger black generation. She reserves special scorn for what she calls "hippity-hop," thus setting up a culture clash that will grind through the rest of the picture. She is stirred to ecstasy by the gospel chanting at her church, whereas the Marlon Wayans character is all proud insolence and dirty mouth. These two seem not merely to be pursuing different tastes but to be living in different eras (indeed, to hail from different movies), and, if the film's sense of period is confused, its sense of location is no firmer. As Marva bids farewell to the sheriff, she steps out into a desolate flatland; yet, two shots later, she is ambling through the cozy efflorescence of her street. You begin to wonder: Where, in every sense, is "The Ladykillers" coming from?

If it doesn't go utterly astray, that is thanks to Tom Hanks—a reliable anchorman, and the only superstar of the moment who does not blanch (see "Apollo 13" and "Saving Private Ryan") at the rewards of ensemble work. His Professor is a Twainian dandy with a chuffing, hiccuppy laugh and a refusal to employ a plain word where there may be an ornate alternative. When Pancake blows a finger off, his boss refers to "your maimed extremity." But Hanks operates best under pacy conditions—twitches and glitches of plot that demand his immediate attention—and the Coen brothers, despite having picked one of the more suspenseful Ealing projects, slow it down until their leading man is fighting for air. Also, was it merciful of them to saddle any modern actor, however skilled, with the task of treading in the footsteps of Alec Guinness?

Guinness, the patron saint of Ealing, played the Professor in 1955. Our first sight of him remains one of the most celebrated entrances in cinema: the landlady opens the door to reveal a leering spectre, whose low-voiced attempts at affability simply strengthen our impression that Nosferatu has taken ship to London. The part was purest Guinness, being neither just creepy nor just amusing but always a pungent hellbrew of the two. You caught a whiff of genuine horror in that net-curtained cityscape, still politely exhausted by the strains of war, and so insidious was the central performance, set in relief by the broader jokiness of the henchmen (Herbert Lom and Peter Sellers among them), that, even though Mackendrick shot the movie in color, it lingers and thickens, in one's mind, as a murk of black-and-white.

No such shadow falls across the remake. Mrs. Munson discovers the burglars' scheme, and they respond accordingly, but what ensues is more of a chore than a thrill. Our nerves remain unplucked, save for a single image of the General stepping into a dark bedroom with a garrote. The Coen brothers have "Blood Simple" and "Miller's Crossing" to their name, but they are oddly unwilling to let the bitter atmosphere of those movies seep into the languid folderol of "The Ladykillers." Are these super-controlled filmmakers really content with a career as pasticheurs? The highlights of their work are easy to spot, not least because they coincide with actors—Frances McDormand in "Fargo," Jeff Bridges and John Goodman in "The Big Lebowski," Goodman again in "Barton Fink"—whose gift is to warm and relax an audience, to overflow the bounds of a movie's game plan, and thus to foil the machinations of the Coens, whose talent is for tensing us up and luring us into the limited joys of an in-joke. The Coens prove, time and again, that they

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have mastered a particular *kind of* movie, but only seldom have they convinced us that here was a movie, one movie, that they felt driven to create. Their worship of screwball is plain to see, but did "The Hudsucker Proxy" add an ounce of novelty or urgency to that blistering American tradition? "The Ladykillers," like "The Man Who Wasn't There" and "Intolerable Cruelty," is the product of artists who have settled for making films about films, reluctant to consider the pull and messiness of life beyond the theatre. "The Ladykillers" succeeds as homage but as nothing else.

Should you need respite from the Coen brothers, you could do worse than "Intermission," which has messiness to spare. Judging by the spotty appearance of this picture, its budget was approximately a hundredth of that afforded to "The Ladykillers," yet it comes with ten times the zip. Colin Farrell found time, in his busy hell-raising schedule, to fly to Dublin and film the role of Lehiff, a jutting fellow who can grin wooingly at a woman and, within seconds, descend to the level of the brutes. He, like the Professor, is party to theft; together with blue-eyed John (Cillian Murphy), he plans to rob a bank by taking hostage the bank manager's girlfriend, Deirdre (Kelly Macdonald), who just happens to be John's ex. If you lack a fine palate for serendipity, avoid this movie.

The great thing about "Intermission" is that you barely have time to spot the gaps. John Crowley's film is high on its own briskness, and its glances at Irish backstreet life—where a policeman (Colm Meaney) can jump out of his car, chase after a suspect, and come back to find the car stolen—land it securely in the terrain that was mapped out by Stephen Frears's "The Snapper" and "The Van." Those films were similarly blessed with the sardonic presence of Meaney, who looks relieved, as ever, to get off the U.S.S. Enterprise and return to home turf. Crowley is tempted, as the Coens are, to construct a character from running gags, which feels to me like cheating; yet there's no denying his humane delight in making sure that all the folks onscreen, from cops to robbers, are bad at what they do. Of the many plotlines—I could mention the singles night for older ladies, or the bus driver with a vendetta—the silliest one concerns a stolen bulk order of steak sauce. John and his mate even squirt the stuff from plastic bottles into their tea, and encourage a skeptical Lehiff to do the same. My happiest memory of this movie is seeing Colin Farrell gingerly sniff the mug of brown liquid and then take a sip. "That's fockin' delish," he says. Couldn't somebody be persuaded to run this line on the poster? ♦

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Volume LXXX, No. 7, April 5, 2004. The New Yorker (ISSN 0028-792X) is published weekly (except for six combined issues: February 16 & 23, April 19 & 26, June 14 & 21, July 12 & 19, August 9 & 16, and December 20 & 27) by The Condé Nast Publications, which is a division of Advance Magazine Publishers Inc. PRINCIPAL OFFICE: The Condé Nast Building, 4 Times Square, New York, NY 10036. David Carey, vice-president and publisher; Chris Mitchell, associate publisher; Peter W. Jurew, associate publisher, marketing; Ronda Carnegie, advertising director; William Li, advertising director; Marie Wolpert, advertising director; Susan Harrington, director of creative services; Bob Gruters, director of marketing and strategic planning; Theresa Gaffney, creative development director; Rosemary Stanton, advertising business director. Advance Magazine Publishers Inc.: S. I. Newhouse, Jr., chairman; Steven T. Florio, vice-chairman; Charles H. Townsend, president and C.E.O.; John W. Bellando, executive vice-president and C.O.O.; Jill Bright, executive vice-president–human resources; John Buese, executive vice-president–chief information officer; David Orlin, senior vice-president–strategic sourcing; Robert Bennis, senior vice-president–real estate. Shared services provided by Advance Magazine Group: David B. Chemidlin, senior vice-president–general manager, shared services center. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Canada Post Publications Mail Agreement No. 40644503. Canadian Goods and Services Tax Registration No. R123242885. Canada Post return undeliverable Canadian addresses to: P.O. Box 1632, Station A, Windsor, ON N9A7C9.

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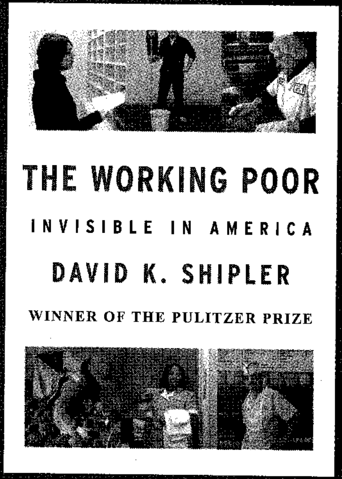

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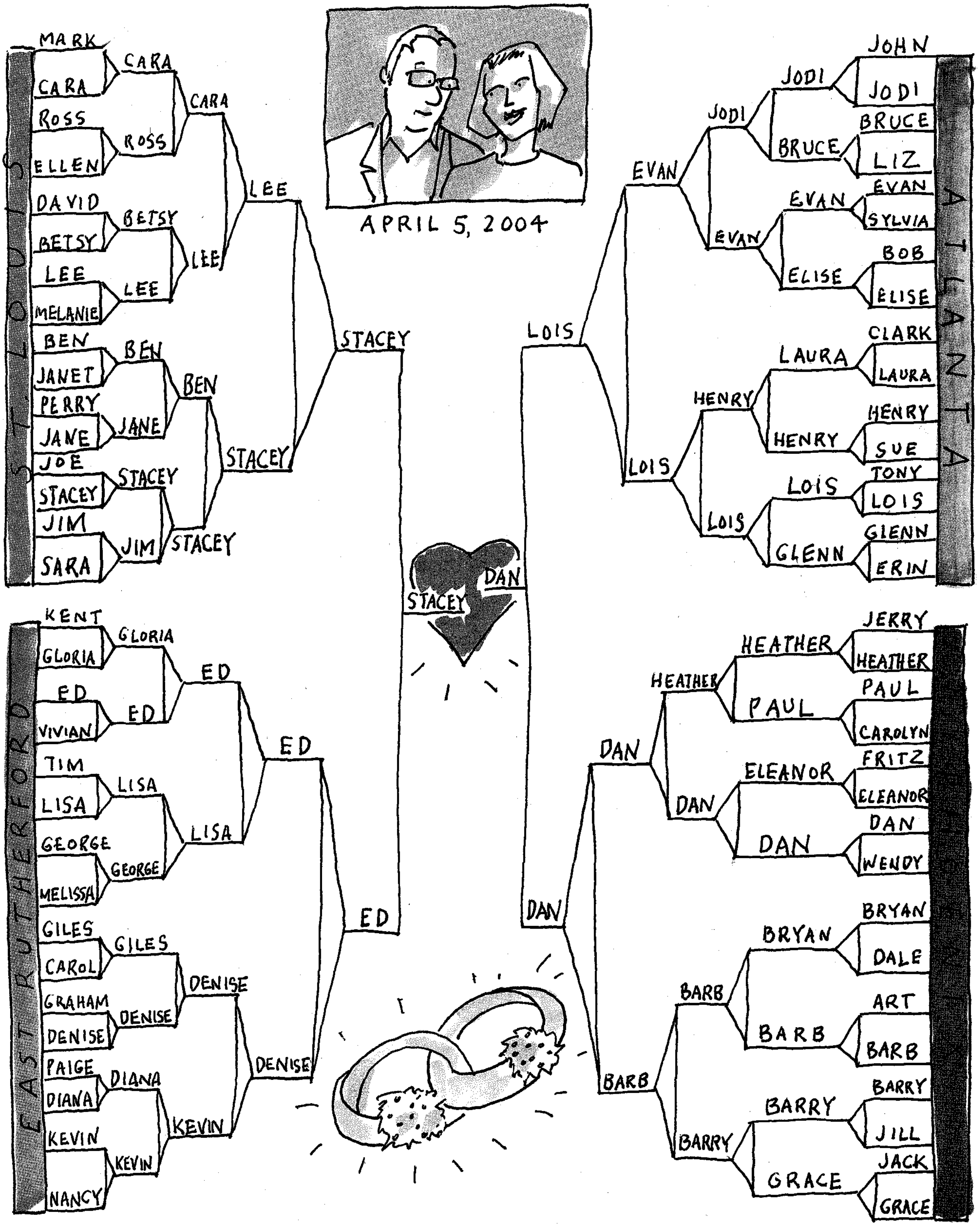
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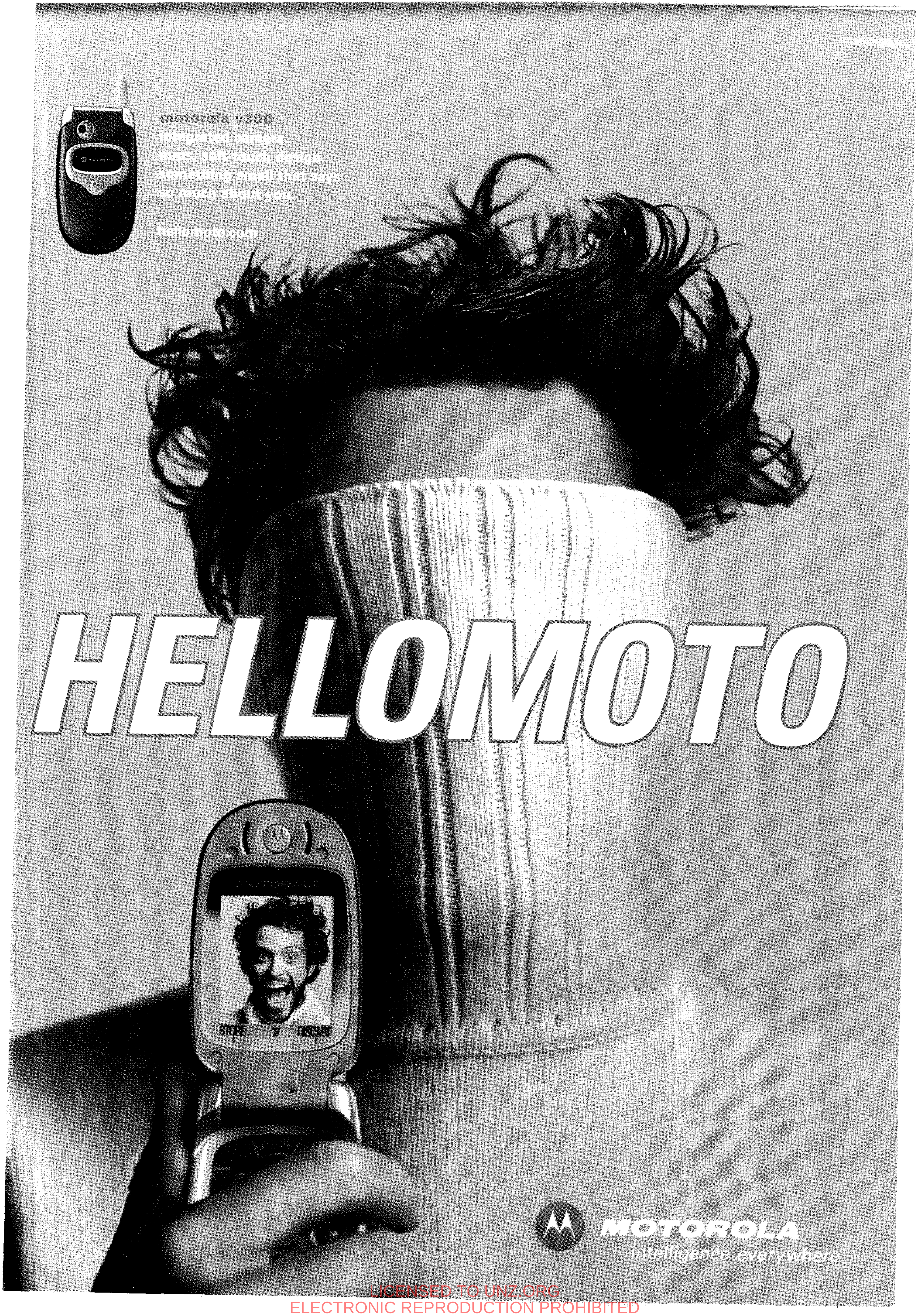
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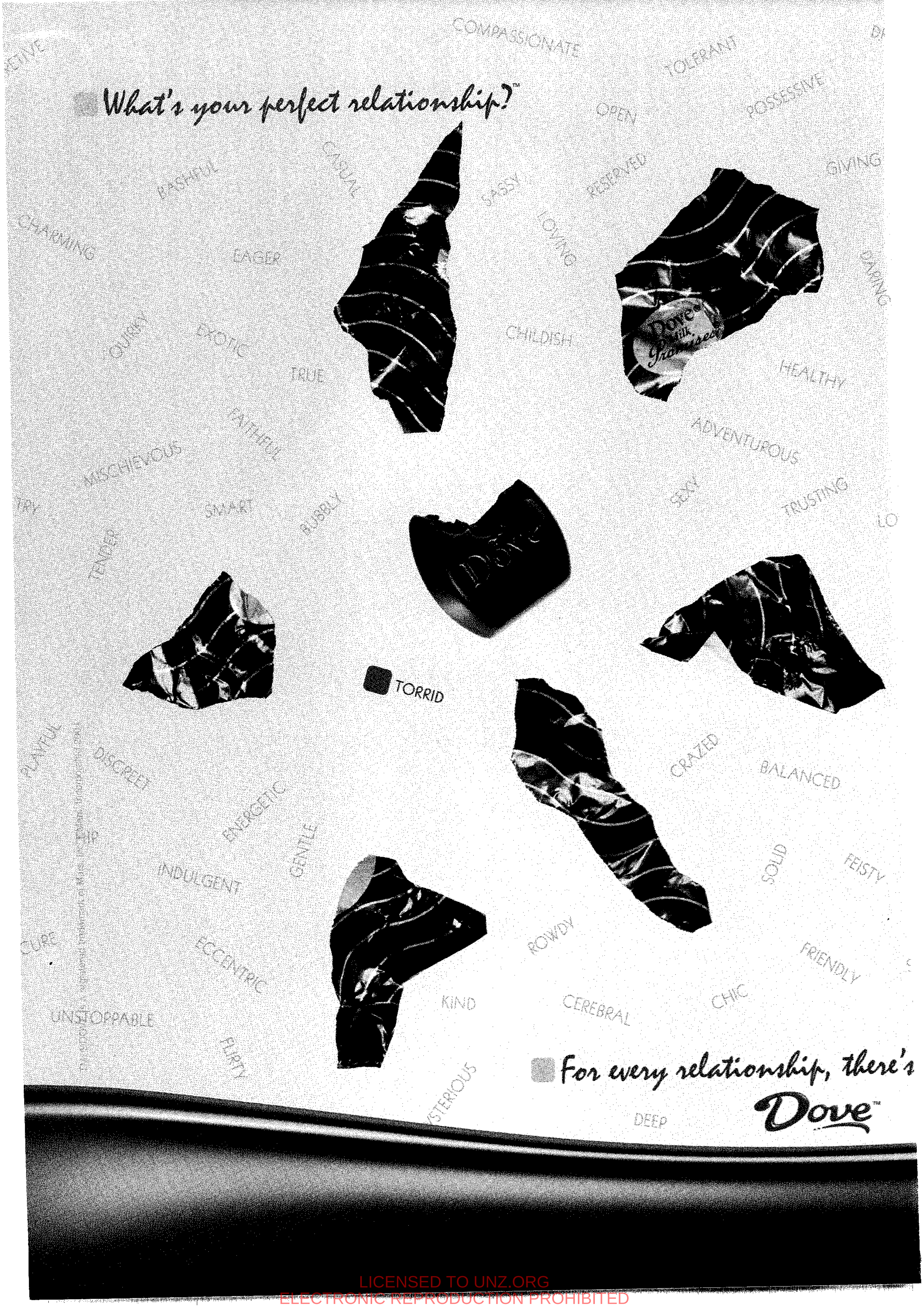
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